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Grande Riviere, and the Turtles and Bats of Mont Plaisir

I'm in the sea turtle conservation business. My job sometimes takes me to faraway and exotic places. Some places, and people, and things, however, leave an indelible impression, like your first smell of a frangi panni flower, your first sip of passion fruit juice, your first swim in a phosphorescent ocean, your first love. Grande Riviere is such a place. Nearly a decade ago circumstances placed me on Trinidad, a beautiful multi-ethnic island nation of friendly, likeable people. I was working with their Government on sea turtle conservation when I first visited. With unfortunate timing, I arrived too early to witness the spectacle of the leatherback sea turtles returning to Trinidad shores to lay their eggs. Undeterred and optimistic, squeezed between official business meetings, two colleagues and I had rented a car and set off to the Island's somewhat isolated, remote northeastern corner, in the Toco District, where I knew sea turtles nested in great numbers. Several hours later and road-weary, we had arrived at Grande Riviere, a small coastal village on a beach-lined bay. Located far to the east on Trinidad's idyllic north coast, a coastline of beautiful and enchanting coves and baylets, the village lies on the edge of lush green mountains that drop abruptly to greet the blue ocean, the kind of place I'll drop anchor and stay awhile if I ever fulfill that sailboat dream I've had since youth. At Grande Riviere, a cool, clear-flowing river flows northward out of the Northern Range to meet the azure sea. A wide, placid, freshwater estuary beckons invitingly behind the narrow strip of beach separating the river from the sea. During nesting season, this small beach barely a half-kilometer in length attracts thousands of leatherback sea turtles, *Dermodochelys coriacea*. These remarkable creatures, by far the largest of all sea turtle species, reaching up to a thousand pounds in weight and capable of diving a thousand feet, are threatened with extinction, for a myriad of mostly-anthropogenic reasons. Simply, our gillnets, longlines, and poaching have catastrophically taken their toll. Some day they may disappear from these waters entirely, as is now imminent at Terengganu, Malaysia, where once 50,000 Pacific leatherbacks would nest in a season, now less than a half-dozen arrive each year. Atlantic leatherbacks and other smaller sea turtle species, however, still gather here on the northeast coast of Trinidad between March and May to dig their nests and

bury their eggs. Each leatherback will nest several times a season, at about week and a half intervals, carefully depositing and concealing her hundred or more eggs, then departing, not to return for 2-3 years--if she survives the fishermen and their lethal gears during her pelagic interlude.

Seven years have passed since my first visit to Grande Riviere, but it seems less. My colleague and I are hungry and thirsty after the long drive. The small, quaint Mont Plaisir Estate hotel-restaurant again beckons, this time familiarly, with its faded-yet-happy pastels of pink, yellow, and blue surrounded by lush greenery. It sits just above the high tide line about mid-way along the beach, a few hundred meters west of the rivermouth. Behind the hotel, green, densely forested hills rose to meld with the Northern Range. The hotel, partially shaded by the massive branches of an old almond tree, faces the blue Caribbean just 50 meters away. To the right, a high, lush, forested headland juts northward into the sea, forming the protected bay that takes its name from the river. On its western end, the sandy beach is narrow and ends abruptly at a small rocky point. Small waves break over the shallow, sand and cobble bar formed at the river's juncture with the sea. Local boys are surfing the chest-high waves that wrapped around the headland and crested about 25 meters offshore.

The hotel and restaurant is owned by Piero Guerrini, a hospitable Italian emigré. On my first trip, as we ate delicious pasta, he had convivially treated us to a bottle of red wine and sat with us, filling our cups and his own. Watching the waves rolling in, the sun sparkling on the water, we had savored the food and wine, and drunk in the smells and sounds of Grande Riviere as Piero sipped his wine and described the leatherbacks. "There are many during the nesting season, as many as 10,000 nests on this beach," he said. "So many that they crawl into my hotel vegetable garden and make a big mess, digging their nests! I built that small fence to deter them," pointing to the small white picket fence that ran behind the almond tree along the front of the hotel. I envisioned the exertions of a determined mother turtle as she hauled her 1,000-lb-plus bulk up the sloping beach past the high-water mark, looking for the perfect spot to dig her nest. In the distance, I caught glimpses of the surfriders at the rivermouth as they bobbed up and down in the swells.

After lunch, Piero had showed me around the estate grounds where he had plantings of many varieties of fruits and trees: cacao, mango, avocado, pawpaw, citrus, and others. A caged Capuchin monkey chirped and chattered from a cage as we walked past. Piero had lifted it out of the cage and put it on his shoulder as we walked.

Almost a decade later, and I'm back in Grande Riviere. When weeks earlier I learned that I would be returning, I called the hotel and spoke with Lydia. Yes, Piero is still here, he still owns it, she said. No, the leatherbacks have not really started nesting yet, it's too soon, though we have had one nest already this season, and perhaps you might see one. My spirits rose. For the occasion, I picked up a bottle of wine at the Piarco International Airport's duty free store.

I would not have recognized Piero, nor he I, had we crossed in passing elsewhere. It was too long time to remember a few amicable moments spent chatting and drinking wine. No matter; we are both happy for my return, albeit too soon (perhaps) for the leatherbacks.

Piero no longer has his monkey; he has instead a wonderfully mellow, grey, bristle-haired mutt, Prince, who greets our arrival. Actually, Prince, I later learn from Piero, can trace his not-so-motley origins to Belgian sheepdogs. Like all dogs, he relishes a good head-and-ear scratching. Accordingly, he sprawls himself strategically in the sunlit path between the hotel's shaded parking ground and the reception desk. It is impossible to get past 'Il Principe' without practically walking over him, and he gets rubs and scratches from most guests who pass: At least I am unflinchingly seduced.

I learn more about my gracious host; he was married to a Trini woman and has a 10-year-old daughter in Port of Spain. He travels back to Italy, to the Tuscany region, his birthplace, for

several weeks out of each year. He has owned Mont Plaisir Estate for thirteen years. Remarkably, a young couple from Courmayeur, a mountain town in northern Italy, has serendipitously picked out this hotel from the internet version of The Lonely Planet Guide, never knowing that their amicable host-to-be was a fellow Italian, practically a neighbor. Now they are all chatting animatedly at a corner table, a bottle of red wine in front of them. There are few other guests; the hotel is small, just about 8 rooms, each decorated with a singular, distinctive flair and theme. It's early yet, the hotel will fill up during the nesting season. I say hello to a young Spanish couple traveling with a mother-in-law. Their lispy Castillian accents are as unmistakable as the pungent smell of Spanish tobacco they smoke unceasingly. Other than the Spaniards and the Italians, Clay and I are the only guests. I hope the leatherbacks will join us after dark.

It's late in the day. I change into board shorts and walk to the river mouth. There are three young men surfing the small-to-chest-high waves winding around the point. I swim out to them and body surf while they catch waves on their boards. They keep to themselves but are not unfriendly, occasionally looking curiously at the old man. Their cheerful banter and hoots fill the air. The only shout I recognize is "Outside! Outside!" as a bigger-than-average swell approaches. They scramble instantly, furiously, seaward, jockeying to get into position to catch the wave. Their youthful exuberance makes me happy. I swim, float, paddle, and bodysurf for about an hour among them, the water cool and refreshing, before tiring and swimming in. Behind the narrow beach berm, I plunge into the cool, clear, river and rinse. I trudge tiredly, happily, back to the hotel. The boys, like seals, stay in the water.

As night falls, Clay and I sit in our lounge chairs on our balcony over the restaurant, feet propped on the railing, sipping cold, pre-dinner Caribs and talking quietly, contemplating the gathering twilight. It gets dark very quickly. Soon, fireflies appear and float magically over the beach, like faeries from A Mid-Summer Nights Dream. Bats the size of finches flit back and forth, swooping and soaring, preying on flying insects. I put my faith and trust in their acute echolocation skills and try not to wince as they hurtle past, often disconcertingly close to my head. At eight o'clock, we go down to eat.

Dinner is a delicious meal of salad with fresh vegetables from the hotel garden, bruschetta, calaloo soup (too savory and wonderful to describe with mere words), pork chops for Clay and spaghetti bolognese for me. Sometime between the first and second Carib (and fortunately after the delicious calaloo had been consumed to the last drop), a clumsy beetle falls from the overhead onto the table in front of me. I pick up the ungainly insect and examine him curiously. Dark brown, the kind of beetle that flies too close to the light and gets disoriented. As a youngster in Puerto Rico we called them ka-kú-lows. I toss him into the night.

Dinner is followed by an unsteady walk on an uneven, pitch-black beach, clutching our after-dinner cordials. Fortunately, we trip over no nesting turtles but sadly, we see none either. On the horizon over the dark sea, a shooting star flares briefly as constellations materialize overhead in a pitch-black sky--the Dippers; the Seven Sisters; Orion, with Betelguese and Bellatrix; Orion's companion Canis Major--the Big Dog--with Sirius the Dog Star burning very brightly blue; and nearby, Scorpio with red Antares burning hotly.

When we return from our walk, we meet the young Italian couple, Michel and Bubi. We chat; their family owns a small ski-hotel in Courmayeur, in the Italian Alps, but they themselves are snowboarders. They say goodnight and leave; they have the 3rd upstairs balcony room, adjacent to mine. I fetch my wine bottle from the kitchen cooler and present it to Piero. He laughs, thanks me, and pretends to wrinkle his nose at the French Beaujolais. "Too bad it's not Italian!" he quips and smiles as he deftly uncorks it. The wine is pleasant--soft and fruity. The conversation turns to turtles. We drink the wine and talk about Grande Riviere's leatherbacks and of better ways to spend precious, scarce, sea turtle conservation dollars. Piero tells us he wants us to meet a passionate local sea turtle conservationist, Sherman Ruiz, before we leave. I know of him already, of his sea turtle conservation work in northeast Trinidad, from his writings. A singular individual, totally devoted to sea turtles, ardent about their conservation, impatient with the pace

and direction of government and NGO efforts to protect them. And well he should be: A study by the Trinidad and Tobago's Institute for Marine Affairs, in 2002 confirmed that bycatch of leatherbacks is high in Trinidad. The Institute estimated that more than 3,000 leatherbacks were captured incidental to gillnet fishing in the coastal waters of Trinidad in 2000. As much as one half or more of the gravid turtles may be killed. However, many of the turtles do not die as a result of drowning, but rather because the fishermen butcher them in order to get them out of their nets. Something must be done.

It is late. Piero says goodnight, and Prince pads silently after him. Clay and I sit on our darkened balcony, contemplating the shadowy beach, listening to the waves thumping nearby, still hoping to see a sea turtle crawl out. The bats continue their aerial ballet. We finally go to bed, full of good food and wine, tired from the drive and the walk and the swimming.

I crawl under the canopy of mosquito netting hanging from the overhead fan and wrap myself in a sheet and thin blanket. The night air is cool and slightly damp. Overhead the fan blades spin rapidly, the motor humming quietly. The room is open in the front and back, the saloon style front doors ajar, letting in the night sounds and a light breeze. I hear a soft impact over my head, immediately followed by a squeak and a skittering sound as something hits the floor and slides along the smooth polished wooden boards. I can imagine what has happened though I don't get up. Pursuing an insect, a bat has flown into the fan blades. I listen intently but hear nothing more. My eyes close and I wake several hours later. In the dark I fumble for a small light next to the bed, groping for the light switch. The dim bulb reveals nothing--no decapitated bat next to my bed. I step gingerly to the darkened balcony, reach the chair and sit, looking out on the quiet, still beach. No turtles, and no sounds of fluttering, wounded bat wings emerge from the darkened room behind me. I sit quietly for a while. The constellations and stars, except constant Polaris, have moved westward. The sky--what I can see through the limbs of the old almond, is dotted with incomprehensible numbers of stars. I peer down at the beach, willing there to be a hulking dark shadow, a big leatherback. Nothing is moving. It's chilly and damp; the nearby surf rumbles incessantly. I am reluctant to go for a beach walk to look for turtle tracks, knowing the odds are so slim. I hesitate. I should at least look. My resolve falters as my still-warm bed beckons invitingly and the night air chills me. After one last, long, look down the darkened beach I gingerly retrace my steps to bed, mindful of the bat. I find another blanket, turn off the overhead fan, and crawl under the canopy, uncertain of what I will find in the morning.

The birds and the early-morning morning light wake me. It's early, but not crack-of-dawn early. I pad barefoot to the balcony and down the steps to the beach. A few of the hotel staff are up, one drinking his morning coffee, the other sweeping. It's seven o'clock, the old gentleman answers me. I head towards the western point. The sand is cool and moist under my feet, the tide high. As I reach the narrow western edge of the beach I note than any tracks, and likely any nests too, would have been washed out by the waves. Not much room for a leatherback to nest successfully on this end of the beach, I think to myself, as I never-the-less scan the sand for telltale tracks. And yet, Grand Riviere beach may be the second largest leatherback turtle nesting ground in the world, according to some sources. I look for tracks and find none. I walk past an elderly Oriental man practicing Tai Chi on the beach. We nod silently as I walk past. I follow the sandy beach westward to the very end, quite narrow now, occasionally scurrying crablike up the sandy slopes to avoid the larger waves. I reach the end, my path blocked by a small rocky point on which the waves are breaking. Despite the early morning solitude, I find a concealing boulder behind which I covertly "recycle" my previous evening's Caribs, then start back for the hotel. There are many beautiful small stones awash in the surf. I find one that I like, marbled black and white like salt water taffy. I slip the smooth, boomerang-shaped stone into my pocket.

Unexpectedly, the bat finds me. Naked, I almost step on it when I enter the tiny bathroom to shower. It drags itself under the sink and tries to hide. I notice the crumpled wing. I turn out the light and watch it, huddled in the corner, a soft, velvety, dark brown, not more than three inches tall. It will never fly again, I think sadly. The whirling fan blade destroyed part of its wing.

The soft brown wingtip is frayed, collapsed, the thin bones broken. I take a long, hot shower, wondering what to do. I believe maybe I should do something with it. Now the small bat hangs upside down, gripping the irregular wall with its tiny claws; its head, no larger than a big grape, almost touching the tile floor. I shave quietly, rigidly, my toes just a few feet from it, trying not to distress it further.

Breakfast is good: strong coffee, toast, fresh eggs and bacon, pawpaw fruit. I tell Clay and the waitress about the injured bat. What did you do with it, he asks? Nothing, I said. I wasn't sure what to do. Oh, it's only a fruit bat, she exclaims. Dey all around. She smiles. Dey eat the breakfast fruits in the kitchen if we don't keep dem covered. Dey like pawpaw. We take care of it, she says. I just didn't want the maid to come across it unexpectedly and be frightened, I tell her. I don't believe it's a fruit bat, I believe its an insectivore, but I say nothing. She smiles again. Oh, we used to dem, she says. Dey fly 'round here all de time.

After breakfast, I go upstairs to finish packing. The little bat is still hanging quietly, motionless, where I left it. Another bat, bigger, flies into the room and enters the tiny bathroom. It flies overhead in tight circles for several minutes. I listen by can't hear anything except the rapid flutter of its wings. Finally it leaves. I wonder if the the bigger bat have been the mother, or a sibling perhaps? It's possible, apparently. These creatures are highly social and intelligent, I'm told. Monica, my bat biologist friend, informs me later me that people who live with them--researchers, I imagine--say they are smarter and more social than dogs. I brush my teeth quietly and leave the little bat alone. I can't bring myself to do anything to it.

The drive back to Piarco takes two hours, on a warm Sunday morning in sun-kissed weather through the verdant Trini countryside. We had said our goodbyes to Piero and Lydia, given Prince his due--a parting scratch on the head--and left without meeting Sherman Ruiz despite our best intentions. He wasn't in town at the time.

I will return; Grande Riviere is just one of those places you keep going back to.

Eric Hawk
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