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Photograph by Freda Moon for BuzzFeed

Murder And Manifest Destiny On The Mosquito Coast

Fifteen years ago, a mysterious Greek entrepreneur bought and resold a series of tiny islands off the coast of Nicaragua, setting off a bizarre and tragic chain of events that included a reality-TV sensation and allegations of an insidious murder plot. The ensuing chaos brought to light a centuries-old question: Who does land really belong to?

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Pearl Lagoon is a hard place to get to. First, you must secure one of the seats on the small, puddle-jumping prop planes flown by La Costeña, the only airline serving Nicaragua's notoriously isolated Mosquito Coast. The flight from the country's capital, Managua, to Bluefields, a motley port town and the area's major metropolis at about 50,000 people, takes just one hour. That is, when it leaves on time; schedules are the stuff of fantasy here. Its cost is prohibitive for many in this, one of the poorest regions in the second-poorest country in the hemisphere. Often, the only way in or out of the coast is a combination of bus and boat that takes eight or more hours if everything goes smoothly, which it rarely does.

Freda Moon / BuzzFeed

From Bluefields, at the mouth of the Escondido River, a small fiberglass motorboat called a *panga* is crammed with passengers and cargo, everything from watermelons to Snow White piñatas. A roaring outboard propels the panga through maze-like channels of mangrove forest, passing fishermen in dugout canoes. In one, you might see an indigenous Miskito man with an oar in one hand, a cell phone in the other. Passing another, the boat might be weighed down with fishing nets, construction materials or, inexplicably, a small herd of raggedy mutts.

For generations, the Mosquito Coast was a refuge. Both indigenous and Afro-Caribbean, it was populated by six distinct ethnic groups who were never colonized by "Spaniards," as many here still call the Spanish-speaking, Catholic mestizos who make up the majority of the country and with whom they've had a contentious relationship for centuries. Despite a recent influx of mestizo settlers, the coast is an autonomous territory, with its own government and culture. Costeños speak a mix of English, Creole, and indigenous dialects, eat curry-laced seafood stews, and listen to country music, a product of years of trade with Texas and Louisiana. The region was famously depicted in Paul Theroux's novel-turned-movie *Mosquito Coast*, which starred Harrison Ford as a misanthropic mad inventor seeking to tame the place and civilize its people. American journalist Stephen Kinzer once described it as "a Caribbean island that, by some geological catastrophe, drifted toward Central America and found itself part of a foreign nation."

Freda Moon / BuzzFeed

In Pearl Lagoon, there are no banks, no supermarkets, a couple of paved roads, and one skyscraping cell tower. But there are a half dozen churches, and the largest, most incongruous house in town — a place that resembles a McMansion in the Southern California suburbs — is owned by a woman who locals say made her money off the drug trade. The people here are fishermen and subsistence farmers. They go to sea to work on cruise ships and commercial freighters. They live in villages of stilted clapboard, concrete, or cinder block houses on large, undefined lots with ancient mango trees in the yards.

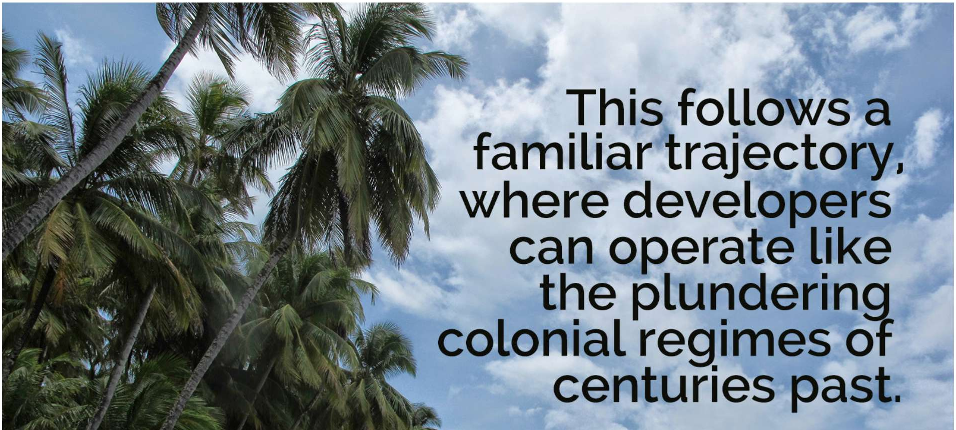
Just off the coast is an archipelago of coconut palm-capped islands known as the Pearl Cays. They're tiny little things (the largest is 26 acres), and they're ecologically fragile. With abuse or bad luck, an entire island can disappear in a matter of years. They have been a stopover for explorers and pirates, smugglers and narco-traffickers. But for as long as anyone here can remember, the cays have also been communal — uninhabited, but well-used by the neighboring mainland villages. They were the highway rest stop of the Mosquito Coast's sea-centric culture, a place where fisherman and travelers could come ashore, escape a storm, stay the night. "We saw the cays as things people use for fishing and coconuts and making coconut oil," says Wesley Williams, a historian and guesthouse owner in Pearl Lagoon. "We never wanted to think about selling the cays."

Yet 15 years ago, after the arrival of an enigmatic foreign businessman, that's what happened. Seven Pearl Cays would end up on the international private island market, and were then purchased by a cast of eccentric, far-flung characters: a British Playboy Bunny and her family, with a reality show crew in tow; a New Age dandy from New Zealand with an identically dressed brood and aspirations for jet-setting fame; a French inventor who dreamed of owning his own sportfishing resort.

They came, and they built. But almost as soon as they arrived, the protests began. The islands were constitutionally protected communal lands, the people of Pearl Lagoon argued. One of the country's most well-known human rights lawyers, a tenacious U.S.-trained attorney named María Luisa Acosta, took on the case. Weeks later, her husband was found tortured and murdered. Acosta fled the coast, and the people of Pearl Lagoon went quiet. In the years since, the men who Acosta believes ordered the killing remain free, and these specks of Caribbean real estate have been transformed.

The story that people here tell of what is happening to their islands — and to Acosta — is surreal and tragic. Yet it follows a trajectory familiar in the often bleak world of indigenous and minority land conflicts, where developers can operate like the plundering colonial regimes of centuries past. As a report published earlier this year by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs describes it, foreign investors are gobbling up indigenous lands like never before, triggering forced displacement in an "ever-expanding development frontier."

Now, more than a decade later, with the facts of her murdered husband under review by the human rights arm of the Organization of American States, in Washington, D.C., Acosta believes she might accomplish something rare in the world of alleged land murders: She may finally get justice.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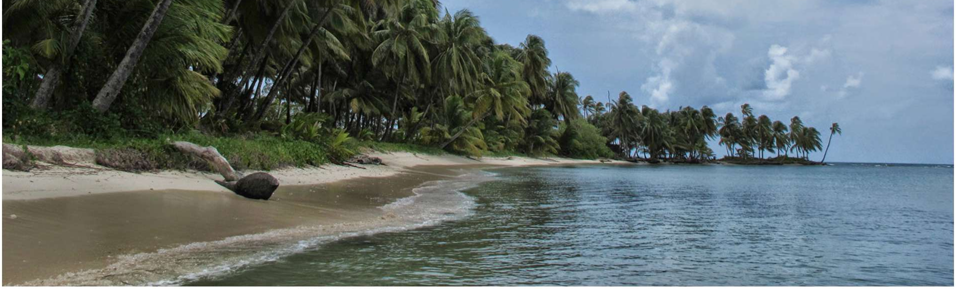
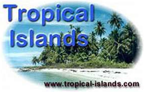


Photograph by Freda Moon for BuzzFeed

The Greek

Among celebrities and the ultra-wealthy, the appeal of remote, private islands is obvious; in place of the historic moat and drawbridge, there is a warm sea. But to actually live full-time on even the most amenable private island means being separated, literally and profoundly, from every relationship you value except those you can take with you. It takes a certain kind of person to make the leap from fantasizing about owning one's own island to actually buying, and moving, and living on one.

Yet if it weren't for this fairly primal attraction, a bland website called Tropical-Islands.com would not have thrived as an early player in what has become a booming trade in private islands. When it first appeared in 1999, it had what was then a standard, no-frills design, complete with bubble fonts in shades of dull blue and drop shadow. Its tagline advertised "Your own KINGDOM in today's developed world." But the site's sparse white pages of plain-text hyperlinks took visitors to images of the Pearl Cays. Even in small, grainy digital photos, they were spectacular.



Tropical-Islands.com / Via Web Archive

The property descriptions were clumsy, but the prices, starting at $105,000, hit a sweet spot: just high enough to suggest legitimacy, but still so low as to seem like a tremendous bargain. In total, seven of the eighteen cays were listed. Among their selling points was the potential for a name change ("Stay in History forever… Live on an island named after your preference!!") and the low cost of living "due to inexpensive labor."

Courtesy of La Prensa

The man behind the website was a dark-haired entrepreneur named Peter Tsokos. *El Griego*, as he'd come to be known in Nicaraguan media, arrived on the Mosquito Coast in the 1990s. He was apparently from Greece, and had at some point moved to the United States, where he seems to have spent time in Texas and Florida and gained citizenship. Nicaragua was not the first place Tsokos had purchased property; he had also been south, to Costa Rica and Panama. Beyond those vague contours of a biography, themselves difficult to confirm, little about him was known.

In Bluefields, Tsokos heard about a talented Creole attorney from Pearl Lagoon named Peter Martinez. With his help, Tsokos began making deals with people who had tenuous ties to Pearl Lagoon but who possessed some claim to the islands. One family lived in Miami. Another was on Corn Island. Another was in Bluefields. If you ask five people in Pearl Lagoon, you're likely to hear five different versions of how Tsokos acquired the Pearl Cays.

At some point, Martinez approached the community's seven-member council of elders for guidance. A hotel owner in Pearl Lagoon suggested he bribed them. Bill McCoy, a former fisherman who now works with the Wildlife Conservation Society, remembers it this way: "He made a big offer to these people. He said, 'We're providing jobs. We're going to help build and fix schools and churches,'" McCoy recalls, adding, "They all agree because he makes things so pretty."

Still others say that the offer was a trick, that the titles themselves, some of which were more than a century old, were fabricated, and that Tsokos paid a pittance for them: $36,000 for all seven. Martinez rejects all of this. "It was a private legal sale supported with all legal documents," he says. He won't say how much the cays were sold for, though he says it was more than $36,000. "The price he paid is the price the sellers asked for," Martinez says.

Once the deals were made, the conflict began. "That's when people start stirring up," McCoy recalls. "People start saying, 'We should have never done that.'"

> “I’m not just going to walk away,” Jayne said to the camera. “I want the island. I love the smell of napalm in the morning.”

THIRSTY!
HAVE A
Lopez

Ricochet TV

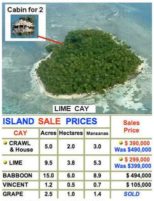
The Bunny Girl

Jayne Gaskin is still proud to have been among Tsokos’ first buyers. She now lives in London, where she recently returned after years in Nicaragua, but she remains attached to the Pearl Cays — so attached, in fact, that she had them tattooed on herself. She has less affection, however, for the local people, whom she describes as lazy, ignorant, and untrustworthy. “They drink,” she says, with her characteristic, casual racism, “and you can buy them with a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of beer.”

In a recent telephone interview, Gaskin could also be cagey and defensive. At one point, her daughter, an aspiring actress, grabbed the phone and angrily objected to questions about the legal status of the cays. Later, the daughter said that she would “crack down” on people who post “lies” about them on the internet. “We will have to sue people,” she says. “We have incredibly good lawyers in Managua.”

It is understandable that the Gaskins would be trepidatious. While they may have left Nicaragua behind, their financial future remains tied to the Pearl Cays.

British media and the reality show that Gaskin would star in described her as a former Bunny Girl, the scantily clad variety of waitress and hostess, but she was reluctant to discuss her personal life, saying only that when she bought the island in 2000, she was a housewife who had become disillusioned with England and “just wanted to get away from the rat race.” “You just sort of dream of living on a tropical beach — don’t you? — when you look out on a cold winter’s day.”



ISLAND SALE PRICES				Sales Price
CAY	Acres	Hectares	Manzanas	
● CRAWL & House	5.0	2.0	3.0	● $ 390,000 Was $490,000
● LIME	9.5	3.8	5.3	● $ 299,000 Was $399,000
BABBOON	15.0	6.0	8.9	$ 494,000
VINCENT	1.2	0.5	0.7	$ 105,000
GRAPE	2.5	1.0	1.4	SOLD

Tropical-Islands.com / Via Web Archive

She landed on Tropical-Islands.com and saw Lime Cay, a 9.5-acre island with typical Caribbean good looks: a patch of verdant green outlined with white sand and surrounded by sea the color of a swimming pool. Photographed from the air, it was the shape of a lopsided heart. “The many tall majestic coconut palms are a true indication of fresh sweet water,” its description read. “This cay can adapt perfectly for a residential estate.” The list price was $299,000.

Gaskin sold her Hampshire house and most of her belongings. With her partner of seven years Phil Broadhead (he adopted her last name at some point) and her three children, who were between 8 and 13, they moved to the Mosquito Coast. A producer for the reality show *No Going Back*, about Brits who make a big move abroad, heard about the Gaskins. Jayne made a great character — gaudy and brash, with the look of an aging porn star — and her island, which she promptly renamed Jaynique, was as telegenic as they come (it would later be used as the location for Spain’s *Survivor*-esque reality show, *Supervivientes*).

The show, which was initially a single, stand-alone “documentary” in *No Going Back*’s first season, stood apart from other episodes of the show, where the drama was most often derived from the petty challenges of, say, a gut renovation on a French Chateau. The Gaskin storyline, in contrast, was so shocking that it warranted a follow-up four months later. Though the family appeared on British Channel 4 only twice (in January 2002 and then again in April), they were still being discussed in online forums years later, with viewers posting questions about what had become of the family.

In the opening moments, Jayne, Phil, and the kids stood on the rugged bluffs of the English coast near their longtime home in Hampshire, looking expectantly out to sea. Jayne was bundled in a white fur coat, her bottle-blonde hair (later dyed red) falling from beneath a massive white fur hat. She looked like a snow cone. An ominous voice-over foreshadowed the story to come: “Their dreams turn into a nightmare and 12 months later, their lives are shattered."

In one early scene in Nicaragua, the family went shopping for a panga, and Jayne insisted it be painted hot pink. In another scene, the family was at a gun shop, where one of the boys playfully pointed an enormous firearm at his 8-year-old sister. Jayne, looking on, wore a skintight silver bodice overflowing with cleavage. When the family finally arrived at their new home, there were long days of clearing, cleaning, and building. During their off hours, the kids raced hermit crabs, Jayne walked the beach topless, and Phil worried about their dwindling budget. Life on Jaynique had its challenges, but the family was, in their way, making it work.

Myspace

Then, Jayne began sleeping with a local man that she and Phil hired to help with construction. When the man, Teodoro, began sleeping with the cook, Jayne banished him from the island. But the drama wasn't confined to Jayne's love life: Tension was building over the Gaskins' presence in the Pearl Cays as community leaders began questioning the legality of their ownership of Jaynique.

At one point in *No Going Back*, the camera crew followed the family into a tense meeting at the small concrete office of Pearl Lagoon's mayor, where they tried to convince him that their arrival would help relieve the coast's desperate poverty. "This is hope," Phil said. "This is the future. This is like Belize 25 years ago. They had nothing and then, everything."

The mayor wasn't moved. "The properties of the people — the indigenous people — cannot be loaned, cannot be given," he said sternly. The cays, he told them on camera, are a kind of sacred entitlement that must be passed down from generation to generation. "We will not give up our fight," he said.

The battle intensified. McCoy, the Wildlife Conservation Society worker, had been hired to monitor hawksbill nests on the islands, and while working one day, he was arrested and jailed for trespassing. "I had to sign something that said I would never go back to the cays," he recalls. A petition circulated complaining about the cutting of mangroves and vegetation that protected the island from erosion. Soon, a demonstration was organized, and a fleet of pangas ferried protesters from Pearl Lagoon to the Gaskins' doorstep. Then-President Arnoldo Alemán even got involved, and he, too, came to the island with an entourage and television news cameras in tow, promising to help the locals reclaim their lost cays.

Through all of it, the Gaskins were defiant. Phil accused the protesters of being "racist" against whites, while Jayne promised nothing short of armed resistance. "I'm not just going to walk away," she said to the *No Going Back* camera. "I want the island. I love the smell of napalm in the morning. That's what it would be. All-out war."

The bluster backfired. Late one night, the family was kidnapped by four armed men, placed on a motorboat, and told they were being held for $1 million ransom. The kidnappers wore masks, but the family recognized the voice of their leader: Teodoro, Jayne's former lover. Phil fought back, dousing one of the men with gasoline from the panga's outboard motor. The boat was set ablaze, and the Gaskins waded deep into the mangroves, where they hid overnight. The family survived, but Phil developed a life-threatening respiratory infection. "The only way I can escape this island is in my dreams," he told the reality show crew afterward.

"The selling of the cays
is like if I tell an American,
'I'll sell you the White House.'"

María Luisa Acosta *Freda Moon / BuzzFeed*

The Lawyer

María Luisa Acosta is sitting in the lime-green waiting area of the Managua International

Airport's dingy domestic terminal. Beneath fluorescent lights, her voice competes with soccer-match shouting from the television at a nearby snack stand. She's telling her life story, and in her white knit shirt, faded blue jeans, and dangling coconut shell earrings, she more closely resembles the political activist she is accused of being than the internationally respected attorney that she is. With her wild mess of short, black curls — without a trace of gray at 54 — and huge, round eyes, she looks like a professorial but still feisty Betty Boop.

Like most people from the Pacific, Acosta says she grew up knowing next to nothing about the Mosquito Coast. Her family lived a relatively comfortable life in Chinandega, a comparably wealthy agricultural city near the Honduran border. Her father was a corporate lawyer, and her mother owned a pharmacy. As the country lurched from revolution to civil war in the late 1970s, she and her five siblings fled the country. Most made their way to Miami, but Acosta went to Bogotá, Colombia, where she enrolled in law school. "I thought I was going to work for a bank with my high heels," she recalls.

Acosta eventually earned a Fulbright scholarship to the University of Iowa, where she studied with James Anaya, a human rights lawyer who later became the United Nations special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples. When Acosta was finally able to return home to Nicaragua, she began working with Anaya on a case that would make history and redefine international law: It would be the first time an indigenous group would successfully sue to halt a landgrab in international court. For Acosta, it was an exhilarating experience. "I thought I could do anything," she says.

What began as a brief project — Acosta was initially hired for a few months — lasted seven years, and by the end, she had founded the Center for Legal Assistance to Indigenous Peoples. To be closer to the communities she was now representing, she moved to a yellow two-story house on a hill in Bluefields. One night in 1994, a friend introduced her to a handsome college chemistry instructor named Francisco García.

García, then 37, had grown up in Bluefields when it was a very different place. Many of the streets weren't even dirt then; they were carpeted in grass. The drug boom and its myriad dangers hadn't yet driven the families who could afford it to fortify their homes with razor wire. "You could leave your house open the whole night and the whole day," is how Donald Weil, a doctor who had been friends with García since childhood, remembers it.

When he was young, García had a taste for partying and a problem with rum. But by the time he and Acosta went dancing that first night, he had quit drinking, found God, and survived the long, often lethal escape route traveled by many to the United States — a train trip through Mexico — during the civil war. Like Acosta, he had married and divorced. "We were a traumatized people," Acosta says.

When Acosta met García, she wasn't looking for a husband. Her first had left her, after all, abandoning her with two children. But after a year, she and García had become close friends. They had to do little more than spend the evening watching the sky together to be happy. He wasn't involved in the kind of politically charged work that she was, but he

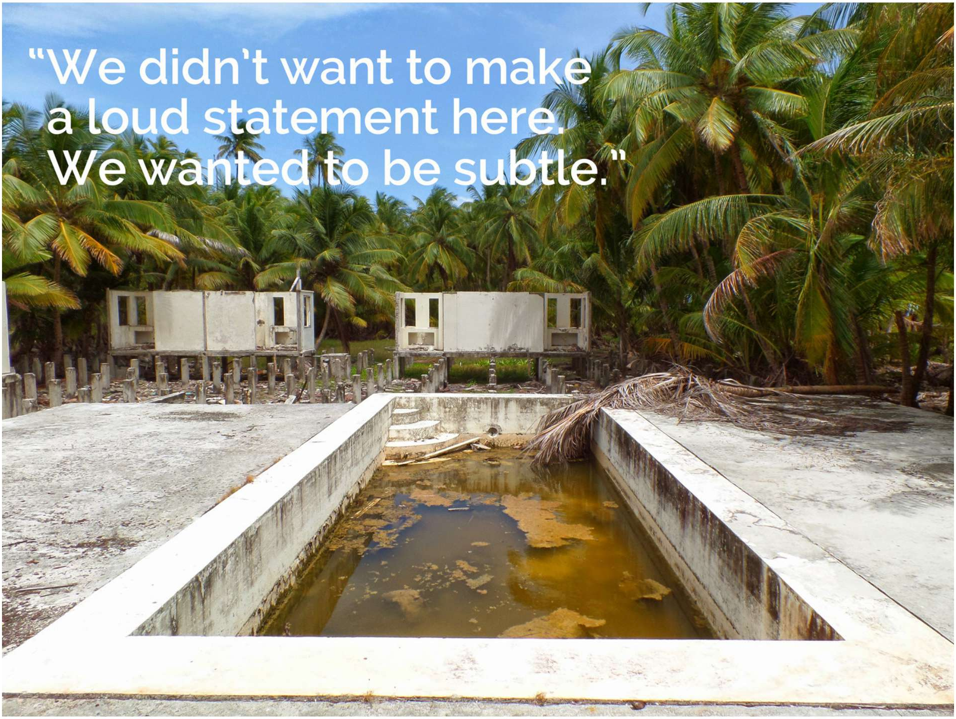
Courtesy of Maria Acosta

respected her for it. They married, and García moved in with Acosta. He treated her children as his own. “I used to tell him, my life before was like eating bread,” Acosta says. “But with you, it’s like with butter.”

García taught at the new college, the Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University, ran his own casket and fabric business, and was the president of the local chamber of commerce. “People loved him,” Weil recalls.

By then, Acosta had a reputation too. On the streets of Bluefields, people would call out “*Doctora*” as she walked by. She had represented a group of Miskito and Creole shrimp fishermen suing for better labor conditions, and eventually won them a settlement of $150,000. South of town, she took on a land dispute with the Creoles of Monkey Point. To Allen Claire, a community leader there, her honesty was unusual: Unlike other lawyers from Bluefields, whose loyalty could be acquired for the right price, she didn’t ask for money, he says. She didn’t need it: Much of her work was funded by grants from international nongovernmental organizations.

Indigenous rights had never been a specialty in Bluefields’ courthouses, though, and some lawyers didn’t think of her as a practicing attorney. Others doubted her motives. As Peter Martinez puts it, “What she did was collect money and make money in the name of the indigenous community.” When Acosta took the Pearl Cays case, Jayne Gaskin saw her as little more than a “troublemaker” who stirred up a community incapable of organizing. “They were quite simple people,” Jayne says.



What’s left of the Thomases’ Little Eden.

The Dandy

“We didn’t want to make a loud statement here,” Martin Thomas said. “We wanted to be subtle.” A sly smile flashed across his face. With his olive skin and sculpted salt-and-pepper hair, Thomas still looked like the male model he’d once been. “Perhaps chandeliers and some of these outrageous antiques are not so subtle,” he said, now grinning into the camera. “But I think overall, the picture is one of harmony.”

NZ House and Garden

Thomas, his wife Jenifer, and their four children had become the latest expats to remake a cay in their image. They were from New Zealand, and a television reporter had traveled from there to document their progress.

Their arrival in 2002 came at an inauspicious time. Acosta had gotten involved in the Pearl Cays case, and one of her tasks was to look into allegations that Tsokos was paying local police to act as private security for the islands. Soon, she would do as she had done with another Tsokos project south of Bluefields, and — relying on constitutional reforms passed in 1987 that protected communal land — challenge the legality of his private ownership scheme. "The selling of the cays is like if I tell an American, 'I'll sell you the White House,'" she says. (Martinez argues that the reforms are not retroactive, and that the cays have always been private, as evidenced by their titles.)

It was against this chaotic backdrop that the cheery Thomases appeared on the Mosquito Coast. Martin had an unusual biography: Raised by churchgoing Christians, he left New Zealand to work as a model in France and Italy, then as an actor in Los Angeles. Eventually, he returned home and adopted the loose tenets of New Agedom. "We now felt less 'Christian' and more 'enlightened,'" he later recalled in a memoir, *Slice of Heaven: A Family on the Move.*

Martin was taken with finery — his children were dressed in matching clothes, including frilled silk shirts and knickerbockers — but he and Jenifer were adventurous too. With their newfound philosophical liberation, they began plotting a journey that would take them far from New Zealand. Using money from an investment property and the sale of their home, the couple purchased a villa in Italy and converted it to a luxury rental, filling it with an antique harp, a grand piano, a crystal chandelier, and other items that Martin, in an interview, describes as "shabby chic."

The Thomas family *NZ House and Garden*

It wasn't long, though, before Martin saw an online ad, caught a flight, and met with Tsokos. For about half a million dollars, the Thomases purchased Wild Cane Cay, which they renamed "Little Eden."

At 26 acres, theirs was the largest of the islands, and its beaches were the most productive hawksbill nesting areas in the archipelago. On one of those shores, Jenifer and Martin planned a lavish villa: The floors, bar stools, and dining room table would be made of rosewood, and there would be more than a dozen French doors. Bed linens would be Egyptian cotton, the swimming pool would be fed by spring water, and the master suite would contain an antique harp, extravagant gild mirrors, and a view of a statue of Venus on a grassy lawn. Later, the property would be advertised as a "temple to good living."

It was all very crystals-and-wind chimes-meets-*Great Gatsby*. Yet it's unclear if Thomas understood what he was getting his family into. He says that he "spent many hours researching the island before it was finally purchased," yet when a boat arrived at Little Eden one day and Thomas was confronted by reporters, photographers, police, government officials, and environmental activists, he was "left reeling," he wrote.

The next morning, Thomas motored to Bluefields and met with Tsokos. The situation, Thomas recalled Tsokos telling him, was the unfortunate result of opportunistic politicians in Managua using the environment to block foreign investment. In Tsokos' view, the question of ownership was settled. The island belonged to Thomas, and he simply needed to present himself as a responsible steward of the "jewels" of Nicaragua's Caribbean.

This, apparently, was all Thomas needed to hear. He might have been less aggressive than Jayne Gaskin, but he too betrayed a blithe arrogance. "I knew that we were pioneers," he wrote. "We were not going to back down now."

There, bent awkwardly on the floor, she found her husband. His face was bruised, and his hands and feet were bound. A single .25 caliber bullet had been fired into his heart.

Courtesy of Maria Acosta

The Murder

One Monday in the spring of 2002, just weeks after Acosta officially became an attorney in the Pearl Lagoon case, she was invited to give a talk to the humanitarian group Pastors for Peace on the state of the coast's indigenous people. The American activists who were hosting the event were late, so Acosta didn't finish until shortly after 8 p.m. She'd lost her house keys, but her husband was supposed to be home; when she returned, he wasn't. Her children were away at college, so Acosta waited. She went to a neighbor's house, but they hadn't seen him in hours. Finally, she made a decision. "I said, 'Well I'm going to get in through the window,'" Acosta recalls.

The way in was through a second-floor bedroom, the same bedroom that her kids would use when they were locked out. She pushed it open, crawled inside, and made her way to the living room. There, she found her husband bent awkwardly on the floor. His face was bruised, and his hands and feet were bound. A single .25-caliber bullet had been fired into his heart, killing him. “I felt like I got into a black hole on the earth,” she says.

Acosta’s former home in Bluefields *Freda Moon / BuzzFeed*

Acosta dropped the Pearl Cays case and left Bluefields. Almost immediately, though, she had a suspect: the man she rented a $100-a-month apartment to on the first floor of her house. His name was Ivan Argüello Rivera, and he was from a barrio on the outskirts of the capital. He had moved in just a few days before García’s killing; now he was gone, and the apartment was empty. But why, Acosta wondered, would someone come all the way from Managua to kill her husband?

Fear over the killing spread and Pearl Lagoon’s fight for the cays fizzled. “When I heard, I said, ‘Oh my god, look at what we have done,’” recalls Ingrid Cuthbert, the former council member. Though at first there was no evidence of a connection, the motive seemed obvious, and word quickly spread that Martinez and Tsokos must have been involved.

Acosta believed this too, and when she was summoned to the large criminal courthouse in downtown Bluefields a week later, she decided to say what many were thinking. Argüello Rivera, she told the judge, was the one who pulled the trigger. The two Peters were behind the killing.

So began Acosta’s protracted, convoluted journey through a judicial system that often makes little sense. According to a recent World Economic Forum survey that examined influence on judiciaries, Nicaragua’s is believed to be among the world’s most corrupt: Of 142 countries, it ranked 136th. Sergio León, a veteran Bluefields journalist, describes the court system this way: “There is no law and order,” he says.

A couple of days after Acosta identified Tsokos and Martinez, the judge who was charged with investigating her claims, Julio Acuña Cambronero, visited her house to survey the crime scene. She told him about a strange phone call from a man who claimed to know where her husband’s killer was. “I know Ivan Argüello; he killed my brother,” Acosta recalls the man saying. “I couldn’t do anything about it. But you will, and I’ll help you.”

Acosta hadn’t been sure what to make of it. Whoever the caller was, he seemed to be following Argüello Rivera. He knew, for instance, that Argüello Rivera was back in the capital, that he had an injured hand, and that he was bragging about killing her husband. The man on the phone seemed like a vigilante, perhaps, and telling the authorities seemed like a prudent thing to do. But when she did, she was asked what seemed like an odd question: Had she attempted to “detain” Argüello Rivera?

Why, she thought, would she — a victim and a private citizen — try to take her husband’s killer into custody? Then again, it was an odd visit. Acosta had accused Martinez of being involved in the murder, but he, too, had arrived with Acuña Cambronero. (“I have a legal right to participate in all parts of the investigation,” Martinez explains.) With the men looking on, Acosta provided a flippant answer that would have lasting consequences. “I said, ‘It’s not my business,’” she recalls. “‘It’s the [job] of the police.’”

A few weeks later, Acuña Cambronero gave an interview to *La Prensa*, the national daily. Tsokos and Martinez had appeared before him and denied involvement in the murder, but he hadn’t yet issued his official decision. Still, the judge revealed a bombshell: Acosta herself was now a target of his investigation. “I do not understand how she as an injured party is not interested in the whereabouts of the alleged perpetrator of the crime,” he said. In Acuña Cambronero’s estimation, she seemed to be covering something up, and he was left no choice but to charge Acosta as an accomplice in her husband’s murder. “No one is exempt,” he said.

> “I think you have to be a certain kind of person to buy an island.”

The Gaskins in 2001 with visitors on the island Jaynique. *Photograph by Mark E. Halliday / Via mrhalliday.com*

The Snake Man & The Frenchman

The first of *No Going Back*’s two Nicaragua episodes concluded with Phil’s health rapidly declining in a bare-bones Bluefields hospital, where he was fighting the respiratory infection he developed after the family’s kidnapping. A caption at the end of the program informed the audience that Phil died in December 2001, just weeks before the show aired. But while the initial episode was merely disturbing, the follow-up was grotesque.

“He was like a goldfish gasping for air,” Jayne explained to the *No Going Back* crew at the beginning of the April update.

Steve Hill, the Snake Man Photograph by Mark E. Halliday / Via mrhalliday.com

Jayne arranged for Phil's body to be transported to the farm of a friend, Steve Hill, a long-haired American who had built a lucrative business raising snakes for the international exotic animal market and who everyone knew as the "Snake Man." Jayne buried Phil in a humble grave at the snake farm, rather than sending him home to England, and Channel 4 beamed images of Phil's grayish corpse laid out in a modest coffin with white satin lining to some 3 million British households. The *No Going Back* footage showed Jayne beside him, mourning in a hot-pink bustier. "I'll never be able to replace him," she said. Phil was buried in a concrete tomb and the Snake Man returned with Jayne and her children to Jaynique.

The Gaskins weren't the only newcomers to watch their fantasy evaporate. In 2001, an American émigré from France named Christian Billard snapped up an island known as Water Cay for less than $1 million. After inventing, patenting, and selling the rights to a fly-fishing device, he was ready to pursue his lifelong dream of operating a sportfishing resort. He renamed the island Coco Cohiba and began building a 12-guest lodge. He would be the chef, and his resort would aim for low-key sophistication. "We'll have no phone, no TV, no fax in the rooms, no umbrellas in the drinks," he told a reporter in 2001. Billard would spend more than $1 million on construction, and he'd employ a staff of more than a dozen caretakers and guides.

The resort was in trouble almost immediately. Fishermen who were paying $2,600 a week for lodging, fishing, and food grumbled that there was nothing to catch and that the guides had no idea what they were doing. People from a nearby village cursed Billard, who was reportedly barring them from the well that had always been their closest source of fresh water. Two years after Coco Cohiba opened, it seemed all but forgotten, recalled Bill Ninke, a fisherman who visited the island in the spring of 2004. The cabins' roofs were filled with holes. Locals were stealing food. The staff quit. Billard "abandoned everything and can't be located to this day," Ninke wrote on a message board several years later. "Everything left was immediately [scavenged]."

On Little Eden, the Thomases seemed to fare better. The fleet of officials never returned, and their warnings about building were ignored. Yet before construction was even complete, the couple discovered that Jenifer was pregnant with their fifth child, a girl they would name Coco. "It was simply not the right place to raise a newborn baby," Martin wrote.

In the end, the Thomases sunk $1 million into Little Eden. But they decided to return to New Zealand, and once the villa was complete, they planned to sell it, along with the cay. In a 10-page advertisement later posted online, Little Eden was described in finite detail — everything from why certain hardwoods were selected ("to retain a natural, organic quality to the construction, without becoming grandiose, or 'overdone'") to the dimensions of the roof support beams. There was no mention of the various conflicts with Pearl Lagoon; instead, the island was described as an "interesting investment" for those looking to trace the inevitable rise in Nicaraguan real estate.

Little Eden, the ad says, had been "broken in," "tamed" and transformed into a "wonderfully civilized paradise."

The asking price: $3.95 million.

"This won't give me my husband back. But this should never happen again."

Courtesy of Maria Acosta

The Judge

Back in Bluefields, Acuña Cambronero didn't find any evidence to support the accomplice charge against Acosta. Nor did he uncover anything to pursue charges against Tsokos and Martinez. Instead, the judge believed just one man should be held responsible for the murder: Argüello Rivera. Acosta's lawyer, Silvio Lacayo, was astonished. Acuña Cambronero had been charged with investigating Acosta's claims and unearthing evidence, yet when Lacayo examined the case file, there was almost nothing there. "He never did anything," Lacayo says.

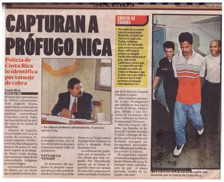
Lacayo appealed, and the case just got stranger. Acuña Cambronero asked him to include a small gratuity, now about $8, to pay for photocopies. Though this practice was officially banned in Nicaraguan criminal law, Lacayo says, he complied — or at least he tried to. ("In a country where there's a lot of corruption, you don't call it a bribe," he explains. "It's socialized.") But when Lacayo delivered the payment to the judge's secretary, she wouldn't take it. "The judge told me not to accept your money," he recalls the secretary saying. On June 3, 2002, the appeal was officially denied: No paper for photocopies had been provided. "They said I didn't ask for the appeal correctly," Lacayo says. "They didn't justify. They just said, 'You didn't file correctly.'"

Lacayo filed disciplinary complaints against Acuña Cambronero, who was transferred from Bluefields. He had family there, though, and when Lacayo saw him a couple of years later, he says he jokingly asked the judge how much he had been paid to handle Acosta's case the way he did. "*Por la boca muere el pez,*" Lacayo recalls him saying: By the mouth dies the fish.

In a brief telephone interview, Acuña Cambronero said that he didn't remember the case, and referred questions to Roberto Larios, the spokesman for Nicaragua's Supreme Court of Justice. Larios did not respond to repeated interview requests.

Acosta, meanwhile, traveled to the United States, where she gave interviews to journalists and appealed to human rights groups. After Amnesty International launched a campaign on her behalf that seemed to capture the attention of Managua, the national police undertook its own investigation. Soon, the authorities recovered a .25-caliber Lorcin pistol that belonged to Peter Martinez. According to a Sept. 3, 2002, ballistics report produced by the criminalistics lab, the bullet that killed Acosta's husband was fired by Martinez's gun.

In Martinez's telling, this was the real scheme — the work of "corrupt officials and their cronies" who "forged" a plot against him, as he described it to local reporters at the time. In the Bluefields courthouse, a judge agreed, and three police officers involved in the ballistics report were convicted of falsifying documents. "The whole situation left the community in shock," recalls León, the journalist. "We didn't know who was the good one, who was the bad one." Yet as with every other seemingly definitive moment in the case, the verdict was fleeting: The convictions were overturned on appeal.



CAPTURAN A PRÓFUGO NICA

Policía de Costa Rica lo identifica por tatuaje de cobra

CHOFER DE TSOKOS

TATUAJE LO 'VENDIÓ'

» En vida el profesor universitario, Francisco García Valle.

IVÁN ARGÜELLO RIVERA cuando fue detenido por la Policía de Costa Rica.

Then, in the summer of 2004, the police descended on a Nicaraguan barrio in Costa Rica. There, they found the man who Acosta had named as her husband's killer. Argüello Rivera had been convicted in absentia of García's murder, and the police found him living under a stolen identity. In a photo published in a Nicaraguan newspaper, Argüello Rivera is shown peering at the ground, stone-faced. He's wearing baggy jeans and an unbuttoned polo shirt, and he has a trim black mustache. The two officers behind him are grinning; one is looking directly at the camera. Once in custody, the convicted killer offered a kind of confession that captured headlines in his home country. When a reporter asked why he had traveled to Bluefields, Argüello Rivera said that Peter Tsokos had sent him.

As the news filtered north, Acosta pleaded with the courts to take a statement from the man who killed her husband. But her efforts went nowhere, and government lawyers would soon argue that Argüello Rivera and an accomplice were lone gunmen driven by their own "antisocial" and "criminal" instincts, as they later put it in a legal filing. Acosta, they argued, had "unnecessarily complicated an investigation."

Acosta's battle with the Nicaraguan justice system spanned five years. She had been willing to accept defeat in Pearl Lagoon — the fight "was like a bulldozer," she says — but not with her husband's murder. In the summer of 2007, she gathered the mass of documents and clippings that sat in large piles in her office and filed a complaint with the human rights commission of the Organization of American States. If the commission agreed to review her petition, which alleged that the Nicaraguan judicial system had violated her human rights, her case could wind up before the same international court that had, nearly a decade before, issued the groundbreaking decision that introduced her as the most important indigenous rights lawyer on the Caribbean coast. "This won't give me my husband back," she says. "But this should never happen again."

Pink Pearl *Freda Moon / BuzzFeed*

The Aftermath

Tsokos' site disappeared in 2009 and its domain name is now registered to someone else, seemingly unconnected to him. While even a cursory Google search provides page after page of warnings about the legal drama and violence surrounding the Pearl Cays, several of the islands are again for sale. Their legal status as private land, Martinez says, has been tested in Nicaraguan courts, where it has withstood the scrutiny of government efforts to undo Tsokos' deals.

Yet those decisions have triggered protests that have "paralyzed" Bluefields, as a local reporter put it ("out corrupt judges" was one slogan), and it's unclear how they'll fare now that the Mosquito Coast has, for the first time, formally delineated community boundaries. This process, which goes by the banal moniker "demarcation," brought government-issued titles and clarity over what were — and were not — communal lands; it also provided validation for what many local people believed all along: that the Pearl Cays belong to the community of Pearl Lagoon. Yet the mayor, Oswaldo Morales Sambola, can't say what this means for private owners. Asked if they were allowed to remain there, he says, "Well, we are not so aggressive." He pauses and laughs. "In some places, the community is going to take them off the cay and tell them don't come back here." He laughs again.

To Acosta, the question of ownership has been settled since 1987, when the Nicaraguan constitution was amended to protect communal land. But that's not her fight anymore. She still runs the legal center, and she's still handling indigenous rights cases, but the fight over the cays remains a tender subject; she didn't return to Pearl Lagoon for more than a decade after her husband's murder. Her case before the Inter-American Commission on

Human Rights has kept her consumed with that grim subject, but in 2010, she won a victory: The commission agreed to review her complaint, and last fall she testified at the commission's offices in Washington. She says there could be a decision by the end of the year.

Tsokos, meanwhile, seems to have all but disappeared. Despite having run an online business for nearly a decade, there's scarcely a trace of him online or off. Repeated efforts to contact him via phone, email, and letter were unsuccessful.

In recent years, another website, PrivateIslandsOnline.com, has emerged as the sleek, luxurious internet showroom for the private island-happy set. Run by Private Islands, Inc., it is regularly spotlighted in publications like the *New York Times* and *Condé Nast Traveler* and seems to have found a lucrative niche in the private island industrial complex — one that has spun off into an HGTV television show, *Island Hunters*, a magazine and a travel division, which rents private islands for budgets from "sumptuous 6 Star luxury to rustic survival." The site claims to have some 4 million annual visitors.

Among the islands listed there are three of the Pearl Cays. One of them is Crawl Cay, which is advertised as "Crescent Cay" and described as part of a chain of private islands; the Pearl Cays, however, are not mentioned. This may seem deliberately ambiguous, but in an email, David Crumley, the Mississippi architect who locals identified as the owner, denied this and asked that the "trademarked" name of the island not appear in this story. The email was signed "David Crumley," yet in a second note from the same address, the writer denied that Crumley was Crescent Cay's owner and that the emails were, in fact, from him.

Freda Moon / BuzzFeed

Jaynique is listed on Private Islands Online too, though it no longer belongs to Gaskin. Jayne sold it years ago to another English woman, Alex Appleby. Once again it's known as Lime Cay, and in April, two young American missionaries on a brief visit to Pearl Lagoon described plans to turn it into a "transitional home for trafficked girls." "An island," one explains, "is like a castle." The island is listed for $750,000. The title, the missionary believes, is British, dated 1854, and has supposedly been in the seller's family for generations. The sale, he says, was in the legal system pending approval. (In a brief email exchange, Appleby says the deed had been "proven in court.")

After selling Jaynique to Appleby, Jayne Gaskin bought another, smaller island, which she named Pink Pearl. The cay, formerly known as Grape, is just 2 acres. It too is now for sale on PIO for half a million dollars. On Pink Pearl, Jayne built a two-story, round, concrete house tucked into the trees. It is, of course, painted pink. Now empty save for an old radio on the floor and a pair of oversize sunglasses on the kitchen counter, the property has the feel of having been abandoned overnight. In the yard, there's an empty heart-shaped swimming pool with two fish circling the bottom in mosaic tile. The grounds are adorned with green and blue and pink mushroom-shaped lawn ornaments, and there's an open-air bar with a thatched roof and a painted sign for Jayne's "Coconut Ice Bar." So far, the property has no takers. "I think you have to be a certain kind of person to buy an island," Jayne says. "They don't sell every day. People want to buy one, but not everyone has the gumption."

Jayne insists that islands' "titles are perfectly clean and legal — 100%" and dismisses any dispute about the ownership as a case of seller's remorse. "There are people who will never accept that their ancestors sold something that they can see is worth a lot of money now," she says. She is selling, she says, because her children are adults and no longer want to live there. Walking away from Pink Pearl has been difficult, but Jayne's love of the cays remains matched only by her contempt for Costeños. It was a mistake, she argues, for the Nicaraguan government to even grant them autonomy.

"The people there are not intelligent enough to run themselves," she says. "They just go around like crabs in a barrel, fighting among themselves and fighting things that they don't even understand properly, like tourism."

Freda Moon / BuzzFeed

The Conservationist

It’s a Sunday morning in April, and Bill McCoy, the fisherman turned conservationist, is motoring his panga through the choppy waters between Pearl Lagoon and the cays; beneath sunglasses and a baseball cap, he’s staring ahead stoically. McCoy still works with the Wildlife Conservation Society monitoring turtle nests on the cays, and he’s been critical of both the local fishermen and Tsokos’ customers: One thoughtlessly grabs the eggs of a hawksbill, the other wants his beach to look like a Corona ad. “If you clear away the vegetation, then you lose the island,” he warns.

Bill McCoy and his son. *Freda Moon / BuzzFeed*

Vincent Cay, the smallest of them to be sold, at just over an acre, has been all but consumed by the Caribbean. Once marketed as an “eco resort,” the thatched-roof cabin and flourishing coconut palms that appear in an online ad have vanished. Just a few denuded, teetering trunks remain. Nearby, on Appleby’s Lime Cay, a beachfront swimming pool is eroding into the sea. The elegant aquamarine home beside it seems not too far behind.

On the island once known as Coco Cohiba, there is no trace of the French fisherman or his resort. (He could not be reached for this story.) Instead, several just-built luxury cabins ring its perimeter. Under a large, thatched-roof canopy, there are several pieces of fine wood and wicker furniture. Half a dozen workers are preparing for the arrival of the island’s latest owner, reportedly a retired Nicaraguan general from Managua who appears periodically, sometimes by yacht. His name is Adolfo “Popo” Chamorro Téfel, and it’s unclear how he obtained the island, or what his plans are for the new cabins. In a brief interview, he says he cannot “confirm or deny” that Water Cay is his. “That is a private matter,” he says, “and I am not forced to talk about my properties.”

On Little Eden, the villa that had been so carefully designed by the Thomases has been eviscerated. The entire thing is gone, except for the battered skeletons of side-by-side his-and-hers bathrooms at the back of the foundation. Scattered between the rows of concrete pilings on which the building once sat are countless shards of weather-worn wood. The satellite dish is a rusty brown, and the once-gleaming swimming pool is filled with algae-laden muck.

Despite appearances, Little Eden was not destroyed by a hurricane. It was destroyed by the people of Pearl Lagoon.

The Thomases’ villa, it turned out, never did sell — a fact that Martin, who now lives in Australia, attributes to a “smear campaign” against him. All the negative media attention obliterated his pitch for “an interesting investment” and “created the current situation that exists,” he says. “I feel like somewhat of a victim.” When the property didn’t budge, the buy-an-island real estate gamble capsized his life. His marriage ended and, now working as a host at a Sydney restaurant, he can barely afford to support his children.

Nearly two years ago, the man who was guarding Little Eden for Thomas stopped getting paid. So, McCoy says, “He took what he could to Bluefields and abandoned the island. Then fishermen came over and took the rest.”

The island is still for sale, though. In an online ad, Little Eden is called “A Personal Paradise.” Photos of the villa-that-was are displayed alongside a description of the cay. The price is listed as negotiable, and under “infrastructure,” the descriptions of the French doors and the master suite, of the matching his-and-hers bathrooms and the Jacuzzi bath, are, oddly, still there; they’re just crossed out. On a visit to the island, McCoy surveys the destruction and shakes his head. “This you should take care of,” he says. “All this is your garbage, your shit, your mess.”

“I’m not ashamed to say it,” he adds. “In Nicaragua, anything is acceptable.”

Photograph by Freda Moon for BuzzFeed

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