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Once on This Island

A FLUTIST AND AN OBOIST PLAY IN A LATIN AMERICAN MUSIC FESTIVAL, AND ENJOY A MUCH-DELAYED HONEYMOON, IN IDYLLIC PUERTO RICO.

BY LISA HANSEN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY PRESTON-SCHLEBUSCH

MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH LATIN AMERICA began at age 13, when I visited Zihuatanejo, Mexico. During my childhood in Fairfield County, Connecticut, beaches meant strips of beige sand, opaque greenish brown waters, and sunbathers. Bordering towns were garnished with tidy shrubs and manicured lawns. Suddenly I encountered virgin white beaches and translucent turquoise waters miles from any town, where deep magenta bougainvillea spilled over stucco villas.

Nine years later, I returned as principal flutist of the Orquesta Filarmónica de la Ciudad de México. Living in Mexico, I was captivated by the Latino people—their soulful eyes, warm spirit, and easy laughter, qualities reflected in their music, art, and cuisine. After moving back to the United States, I joined the North/South Consonance Ensemble, which specializes in music of the Americas. It was as a member of this ensemble that I kept my connection to Latin America alive, and that my husband, Gary, an oboist, and I were invited to perform as part of the Festival Iberoamericano de las Artes in Puerto Rico.

Gary and I met at the Juilliard School in 1978, then lost touch with one another. We reconnected 22 years later and were married in 2001 in the garden of our 1911 Dutch Colonial farmhouse, with Alex, my 4-year-old son, our ringbearer. Baby Dylan arrived two years later, and we were consumed with parental and musical responsibilities, so this trip to Puerto Rico presented the perfect chance to steal a belated honeymoon. In addition, I'd get to introduce Gary to Latin America. Grandparents assumed child-care duties, and by mid-June we managed our getaway!

We flew on a Wednesday to San Juan and stayed in the Condado section near Centro de Bellas Artes Luis A. Ferré, the site of Thursday's concert. (In our quartet my flute was the easiest travel companion. Wolfram Koessel had to purchase an extra plane ticket for his cello, booked as Chantal Koessel, without receiving mileage credit. Gary had to check his reed knives, lest they think him a terrorist. And Max Lifchitz had to leave his familiar and, alas, rather unwieldy piano at home.) Before our evening rehearsal we had dinner at Bebo's Cafe, a popular local eatery, where we sampled the tasty shrimp *mofongo*, a native dish of crushed green plantains stuffed with various meats or seafood.

The next day, having a few spare hours between our rehearsal and the concert, we strolled down Ashford Avenue and along Condado's beautiful beaches. We dined at Ajili-mójili, whose turn-of-the-century hacienda decor and exquisitely prepared food transported us to a more genteel era. The concert's highlight was a piece by Puerto Rican composer William Ortiz, featuring his three young daughters—Aleyda, Nicole, and Amaya—a trio of exceptionally talented singers. It was like a Latina version of the von Trapp family!

Friday morning we arose early and headed through mountainous terrain for Ponce, where we would perform that evening at Teatro La Perla. Located on the southern Caribbean shore, Ponce was founded in 1692 and is known as "The Pearl of the South." On a hill overlooking the city we stopped at Museo Castillo Serrallés, a 1930s Spanish Revival–style mansion overlooking the city, set on grounds dotted with the brilliant orange flowers of the *flamboyán*. Lunch was an artfully prepared feast at Mark's at the Meliá.

The Museo de Arte de Ponce houses the Caribbean's most important art collection, including paintings by Rubens, Courbet, Velázquez, and Puerto Rican masters Francisco Oller and José Campeche. Also here is *Flaming June*, a stunning painting of a sleeping girl done in 1895 by the English artist Frederic Leighton. Backstage we sat next to a Renoir statue!

That evening Max and I performed his *Mosaico Latinoamericano* (*Latin American Mosaic*), a piece

RESOURCES

GETTING THERE:
Continental Airlines has nonstop flights from Newark and Houston to San Juan, as well as connecting flights from most major hubs.

WHERE TO STAY:
The Gallery Inn, Old San Juan (787-722-1808; www.thegalleryinn.com): Artist (and owner) Jan D'Esopo's terra-cotta faces, watercolors, bronze statues, and trompe l'oeil walls adorn an inn that combines Creole, Caribbean, Renaissance, and Spanish influences, with hints of a bordello. There are fountains filled with conch shells, parrots who squawk *hola*, a music room, and a rooftop tropical flower garden overlooking the ocean. Club Seabourne, Culebra (787-742-3169; www.clubseabourne.com): Reached by ferry from Fajardo (787-801-0250) or by plane from San Juan (787-741-8331), this gracious resort comprising villas styled like A-frame chalets is nestled on a hillside above Fulladoza Bay. The rooms have balconies with lovely water views. Amenities include a pool, kayaks, and snorkeling equipment.

MAJOR MUSICAL EVENTS:
Casals Festival (Centro de Bellas Artes Luis A. Ferré, San Juan; 787-721-7727): Founded by renowned cellist Pablo Casals, who also formed the Orquesta Sinfónica de Puerto Rico, this annual festival has been presenting world-class musicians since 1957. Festival Iberoamericano de las Artes (787-721-7727): An array of international soloists, chamber musicians, and opera singers, as well as the Orquesta Sinfónica de Puerto Rico, perform in San Juan, Ponce, and Guayama. Heineken Jazz Fest (787-277-9200): The Caribbean's major annual jazz festival showcases the likes of Jimmy Bosch and Gato Barbieri. World Salsa Congress (787-274-1601): This salsa dance exhibition spotlights international professional dancers at the Caribe Hilton hotel every August.

SALSA CLUBS/OLD SAN JUAN:
Rumba (787-725-4407); Nuyorican Cafe (787-977-1276; www.nuyoricancafepr.com).

For more information about the year's cultural events, visit www.gotopuertorico.com and click on "calendars."

Previous pages: a macaw (left) and a breakfast-nook serenade at The Gallery Inn. Opposite page: dusk in Plaza San José. This page, clockwise from top left: The Gallery Inn's real and painted parrots; a colorful doorway in Old San Juan; a shaved-ice vendor; folkloric festival dancers.

he wrote for my aunt, pianist Katrina Krimsky, and me that we premiered in Switzerland in 1991. Max is not only an eminent Mexican composer, he's also an acclaimed pianist, and the director of North/South Consonance Ensemble. The piece is a wonderful amalgamation of merengue, huapango, and mariachi dance tunes as well as Afro-Cuban, El Salvadoran, and Mayan themes.

Saturday began the honeymoon portion of our trip. From Fajardo we caught a ferry to Culebra, a pristine island off Puerto Rico's eastern coast that was discovered by Columbus in 1493. The passengers sang calypso tunes, accompanying themselves with *batando*-like hand clapping. It felt like island life had arrived already! Local lore holds that buried treasure remains on Culebra, left by pirates who used the island as a hideout in the 1800s. One doesn't need to be a pirate to want to disappear into its lush beauty.

After checking into Club Seabourne we headed to our villa. Since this was our first opportunity to be alone in some time, I'd promised Gary I'd put my flute away after Friday's concert and not practice the rest of the trip. This was difficult. Gary, on the other hand, welcomed the chance to take a break from practicing and reed-making (he spends hours each day meticulously shaping bamboo cane imported from southern France).

This would be the first time I hadn't played since giving birth to Dylan. (I even played a concert at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall the night before he was born!) It was wonderful to suddenly be so carefree in such a beautiful location. Still, not having anybody to scold or cuddle, not having any diapers to change or lunches to make, made me feel like I'd misplaced my identity. So while Gary showered I snuck my flute out of its case and played for 15 minutes. Just enough to remember who I was while still escaping my usual responsibilities.

Later we headed to Playa Zoní, a stunning, remote beach on the eastern shore. We dined at Mamacita's Bar & Grill, a hopping hangout in tropical hues where we chatted with expats and listened to a local calypso drum band.

We swam and relaxed Sunday morning on Playa Flamenco, whose creamy sand and azure waters make it Culebra's most popular beach. Then we hiked to Playa Carlos Rosario, where the barrier reef is ideal for snorkeling. The incandescent underworld of blue tangs, parrot fish, yellowtails, and queen angelfish was marred only slightly by my painful brush against piquant fire coral. At sunset we took a kayak out for a dreamy trip around the bay before a Father's Day barbecue. Hours later we snuck back for a moonlit skinny-dip.

Monday we returned by ferry to Fajardo and headed to our next destination, The Gallery Inn in Old San Juan. The centuries-old wall encircling the city, two grand fortresses at opposite ends of Calle Norzagaray, and swaying palm trees set against a vista of cobalt blue ocean suggest an ancient Mediterranean city. Yet just down the hill, slate blue cobblestones lead to a marvelous fusion of Caribbean, Latino, and European influences. The pastel colors of the buildings brush up against the powder blue sky, as if it were just another hue in an artist's palette. We walked around town after dinner at the festive Parrot Club before turning in.

Tuesday I persuaded Gary to take out his oboe. We found a secluded little garden table at the inn where we had breakfast and serenaded each other. My fingers felt a bit rubbery, but it was good to play. And Gary had only two days when we got home before a double Broadway show day.

After breakfast we headed for the rain forest. A rigorous hike to El Toro, the island's second-highest peak, took us past La Mina Falls, towering bamboo groves, prehistoric ferns, giant trumpet trees, candlewood forests, huge sierra palms, African tulips, and many kinds of orchids. We heard the call of the coquí frog, which mimics its own name ("co-kee") and is often mistaken for a bird. We joked about pilfering bamboo for Gary to make reeds with, but decided it was probably a felony to remove anything from the forest.

Being in the rain forest brought back memories of concerts I played on a Vistafjord cruise down the Amazon. The culmination of that trip was a concert at the opera house in Manaus. I felt blessed that I've had the opportunity to see the world and make music at the same time.

Back in San Juan we ate at Dragonfly, a trendy spot featuring Latino/Asian cuisine, then strolled along the harbor. Feeling adventurous, we entered the famed Condado Plaza Hotel & Casino. Neither of us had ever gambled, so we sat at the roulette tables and talked with a young marine, who explained the rules. I bought chips and, flush with beginner's luck, my winnings mounted. Euphoria set in and I tripled my bets. But like the inevitably receding tide, my chip pile soon shrank to nothing. My eyes glazed over like a hardened gambler's as I bought more, which I soon lost. The marine shook his head and said, "It's all over."

We spent our last morning at El Morro, a fortress built by Spanish settlers in the 1500s. As we were leaving, Jan D'Esopo, proprietress of The Gallery Inn, mentioned that Jorge Federico Osorio, a terrific Mexican pianist I'd known, would be staying there in August. I wrote a note for him in the guest book and we left. It had been an idyllic honeymoon. As we walked toward the airport *salida*, I bid my old flame farewell, knowing that Gary and I would return to Latin America, while a piece of me remained behind. □

*Visit **www.lexus.com/magazine** to learn more about visiting Puerto Rico. You'll also find Lexus' recommendations for Spanish and Latin American classical music titles.*

The author and her husband practicing before the concert at the Museo de Arte de Ponce (left) and catching a romantic honeymoon moment in Old San Juan.