



“SANTA MARIA” ANCHORED OFF “COLUMBUS ISLAND”.

by JOHN HAFFERT

**W**hen Columbus landed on San Salvador he was greeted by a small group of Indian natives. Today two colonies of negro natives and some three hundred whites (who staff a U. S. Missile Tracking Station) inhabit this outermost island, several times as far to the East of us as Cuba and just as far South.

In March, 1962, I sailed to San Salvador and the adjacent islands on an old sailing ship, the “Santa Maria”. The crew consisted of an English engineer, two school teachers from Puerto Rico, a church organist from Jacksonville, Florida, a treasure hunter from Miami, and a magazine editor (myself).

None of us knew much about navigation. But with the crystal clarity of Bahama waters (one can see to the bottom at fifty feet as though through air), a guide book and

RDF (radio direction finder), we made it down Exuma Sound, out between Cape Santa Maria and Cape Columbus, to this island surrounded by deep ocean.

Our first landfall was an island which Columbus named “Santa Maria”, known today as Rum Cay because a ship loaded with rum sank on her southeast reef just before the turn of the century.

### **Confined**

All the inhabitants we found on Santa Maria (Rum Cay) were negro. They had no large boats. The island has no harbor. Most of the natives were born on the island, and had never been off it all their lives. Their connections with the outside world were only two: the weekly “mail boat” and a wireless set.

To get around Santa Maria

(about forty miles around) the natives use brisk, Arab-blooded horses. They are about the size of American quarter horses, and for all their liveliness, amazingly docile and well-behaved. Children were riding them bareback without a bit, and the little animals galloped with high-flying tail and tossing mane like the Arabian ponies to be seen on the Sahara.

The natives told us the horses were “here as long as anybody knows”. They presumed that the original stock was left by the Spaniards.

We were anchored on the South side of their island, the second landfall of Columbus in America. The island protected us from a brisk March wind from the North which had bowled us down here but would have made laying-at-anchor over at

nearby San Salvador uncomfortable. We delayed a couple of days, hoping for the Southeasterly trade wind. This delay brought us into close contact with the natives. The "local bar" was opened in our honor. Built of boards and thatched palm, in a coconut grove, on a beach of fine white sand, it looked so much like a Hollywood set of the South Seas that it did not seem real. A half dozen natives waited on the shore for us in the setting sun. Everything on the island seemed silent. The very sound of footsteps was swallowed by the sandy path to the "bar".

### Silence Routed

Inside, a shelf at one end of the bar, and a bench around the rest of the room, against the wall, was the only other furniture. The "barmaid", assisted by her daughter, silently opened bottles of rum. Then, little by little, the silence was filled by a growing babble of voices, and stories of fish and life and death were breaking the barriers between former strangers, on this primitive island, without electricity, roads or cars. Suddenly it seemed a cosmos of human life little different from the noisier one we had left in the States.

What surprised us *most* was that yachts very rarely visit this island—perhaps because it is well out into the South Atlantic, or perhaps because there is no harbor. Would San Salvador be like this?

### Like No Other

As regards the harbor and scarcity of visits by yachtsmen, San Salvador proved to be quite the same. But otherwise it turned out to be like no other island in the Bahamas.

San Salvador is a long, green giant, alone in a sea hundreds of feet deep on the approach from the West, with the strangest blend of natural beauty, human neglect, conflicting human emotions, history, and rocket-age modernity.

Here, where Columbus first sighted land, a large group of highly skilled technicians trace rocket launchings from distant Cape Canaveral. Here, where a quiet white

Cross on a silent beach commemorates the triumphal landing of America's discoverers, planes shatter the silence as they swoop onto the landing strip. Here, where daring explorers from Europe set grateful feet with perhaps more emotion than the first astronauts will experience on the moon, hundreds of highly trained American technicians with an air of ennui and boredom plot the courses of our rockets into space.

Most of the West Indian Islands are quiet. Many are uninhabited. I had been sailing in those islands for two months and found San Salvador unique.

At the missile-tracking base we were accorded hospitality of unexpected warmth. We found ourselves honored in a plush cocktail lounge. Thick roast beef was served after appetizers of lobster and shrimp. Then we went to the "movies"—wide screen under the stars, palm trees for a theatre roof, and the gleam of the moon on the water and on the white sand of the nearby beach lighting us from the side.

### Unreal

Half way through the film, which was filled with cars and houses, skyscrapers and modern noise, I leaned back in my seat, stared up through the palms, and suddenly realized I was on *San Salvador*—on the island under the same stars where Columbus first landed.

*It just didn't seem real.*

What a shock, I thought, for the hardy little crew of the "Nina" if and when they arrive from Spain this October.

From San Salvador we sailed due West to the third of the three first islands of Columbus: *Concepcion*.

Here, just thirty-five miles beyond San Salvador, *everything is exactly as Columbus saw it.*

The little island—only two thousand acres altogether (including a large interior lake)—is dominated by a small hill. It is protected to the north and south by dangerous-looking reefs, which in calm weather prove to be a most fascinating underwater garden, teeming with every variety of fish. Ruins of two Spanish



COLUMBUS PLAQUE

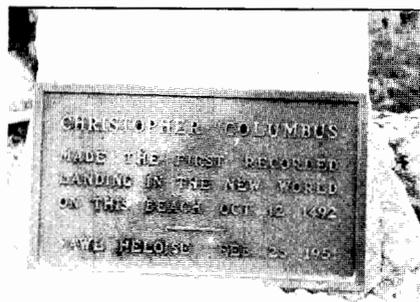
ON CATHOLIC CHURCH

galleons dot the northern reef and add to the allure of this underwater paradise.

A small harbor on Concepcion permitted the entrance of Columbus' dories. He named it "Concepcion" in honor of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin to whom he and his crew had ardently prayed, especially toward the end of their arduous voyage — so close to defeat by mutiny just before these islands appeared.

I was so thrilled by the unspoiled beauty of Concepcion Island that I resolved to petition the Bahamas Government to preserve it as it is for history. This mission brought me back to the Bahamas several months later, and at the present time the Bahamas National Trust is considering the matter. Everyone to whom we have spoken about it has looked upon the idea with favor. To induce action we pledged to raise the necessary funds to have the Concepcion harbor deepened so that even small boats could safely voyage there, and any yachts going

COLUMBUS MONUMENT



to these islands would finally have a safe refuge if suddenly overtaken by adverse weather.

If the new "Nina" from Spain in 1962 would "follow through" on the discovery made by Columbus, she would have to visit not one west Indian island, but three—all close together—and all, in sequence, found by Columbus's fleet:

San Salvador, then "Rum Cay" and finally "Concepcion".

It was a shipwreck at Concepcion Island in our own time which led to the first monument on San Salvador, and to the establishment of the Catholic Church in these islands. A Benedictine priest landed in the Bahamas on February 2, 1891, with the idea of working here to establish a permanent mission. He found the native population so hostile to him that he decided to leave. But before leaving he wanted to visit San Salvador, to say Mass on the ground where the modern history of this continent began. His ship struck the north reef off Concepcion Island and sank.

Struggling for twelve hours in the water, Father Chrysostom clung to a mast and there made a vow to the Immaculate Conception. If rescued he would spend the rest of his life in these islands preaching the gospel.

### **Apostle of Bahamas**

In the ensuing years, Father Chrysostom became known as "The Apostle of the Bahamas". Within two years he had purchased Dunmore House, erected in 1786 by Lord Dunmore and Headquarters of the Bahamian Government until 1806. This became—and is today—the center of the Catholic Church in the Bahamas, as well as being one of the most historic buildings in the New World. He labored here for forty years, and was signally honored by the Crown as "Officer of the most Excellent Order of the British Empire"—an extraordinary honor to be conferred upon a Catholic priest.

During his forty years the thoughts of Father Chrysostom

were often filled with the "miracle" of Concepcion Island, and he made an intense study of the history of Columbus. He died in 1928 on San Salvador, and at his own request, was buried at the spot where he believed Columbus first set foot in the New World.

In the not-distant future, many, many Americans will be able to enjoy the incomparable experience of cruising the West Indies. Ship and air service to Nassau is already a delightful, daily experience for tens of thousands of travelers each year. The "Three Islands of Columbus", with the provision of a harbor and public area on Concepcion Island, should make it an attraction for many yachtsmen and for all commercial cruisers in the days ahead. If a few hardy persons could embark in a small sailing craft from Spain and travel all the way across the ocean to set foot on this historic ground, then how much more will Americans be attracted there when they learn of the wonder and beauty that awaits them.

PICTURED HERE IS THE "SANTA MARIA", FLAGSHIP OF THE COLUMBUS FLEET SAILING IN THE WEST INDIES. ON PAGE 4 SHE IS SEEN AT ANCHOR OFF CONCEPCION ISLAND. THIS FLEET IS OPERATED BY FATIMA TRAVEL, INC.

As this issue of CATHOLIC TRAVELER goes to press, the NINA ... an exact duplicate of the three ships of Columbus ... was reported somewhere between San Juan and San Salvador. With a crew of eight, with charts and instruments no better than those used by Columbus, the little ship had sailed all the way from Spain, trying to reach San Salvador as Columbus had done.

