

January 5, 2010

Hello lovely people,

So, if you don't know it already, Lee and I are in Panama for January and February. We have rented a house that is off the grid (solar power and rainwater harvesting!) on the island of Bastimientos, which is in an archipelago called Bocas del Toro, in the Caribbean. It's unbelievable here. We spent two days in Panama City, walking 5 or 6 hours a day and getting totally lost. The old part of the city is amazing old houses from the colonial Spanish period, many of which are completely run down, yet still inhabited. As is true with many places in the Caribbean, the colors are incredible....bright greens, blues and pinks. Lee and I spent New Years walking around trying to find a party of sorts and finally coming back to our hotel in the new part of the city where we hung out on the roof and watched over an hour of fireworks coming from every direction. It was unbelievable....when I say fireworks, it's not little bottle rockets, etc...I mean the major ones like you see at a fireworks display in the states...Unbelievable! People were shooting these things off of balconies, into other balconies and it was completely gorgeous. Part of me was in awe and part of me was so happy not to be in the street!

So, a couple of days ago, we flew to Bocas and took the boat to our island of Bastimientos. Our house is in the middle of all sorts of jungle trees and has neighbors on each side. There are no streets or really many paths on the island and hiking around is harder than you'd think. We decided, our first day here to take a hike in the jungle and ended up totally straying off the path, getting lost and ending up lost for two hours until we came upon some locals collecting fruit in the swamp. It was great! Let me tell you, the rain forest is wet. We tried to stay away from the mud at first (the little "walk" into town is through a swamp part of the way), but we soon learned that mud is a part of walking. So, we were up to our shins in no time. It was pretty hysterical and Lee and I talked about how we think silly tourists go to places like Australia and get eaten by things because they haven't done any research about the local flora and fauna....in the middle of the jungle, we realized that that was us. Are there poisonous snakes on this island? Wild boars? Jaguars? We have no clue. But it was amazing! I haven't seen any monkeys yet, but hear them often. Also, there are supposedly some amazing frogs here that are bright red...we hear them all the time, but no luck seeing them yet. I have seen a bunch of humming birds, though! After getting lost in the jungle, Lee and I found the "surfers beach, which is pretty much every beach....it's called Wizard Beach and is a long beach with series of rolling waves.

Back at the house, Lee and I have been painting and writing and sitting and playing with 'our dog', who is waiting at our doorstep every day. She is by far the coolest dog ever. We have been doing yoga in the morning, going out for a swim or snorkel and then cooking food. The town closest to us is Bastimientos Town and is a strip of colorful shacks with restaurants over the water that serve a variation of beans and rice, plantains and some sort of meat...that's the local fair. The town has a 'club' which is a shack over the water which blasts reggae and Latin music for a few hours every night...we can hear it all across the bay at our place and will definitely be going there some nights to dance

with locals. There is a little resort of a few huts next to us (5 huts over the water) that is going to let us use their kayaks for free starting next week...so, we're going to explore the islands via kayak soon.

Here on Bocas, the island where we are for today, there are lots of more touristy little places. Things aren't cheap here and the entire country is on the dollar, which is so weird. Who says the US isn't a colonial power? With the dollar and the tourists, it's super hard for locals to get by. In order to travel around, you have to take a 'Panga' or water taxi, which you call with your cell phone or use a hand made flag to bring over to your dock. Lee and I tried to make a flag and wave one down this morning for about 30 minutes. It didn't work. It was pretty funny, though. Finally, we gave up and went to the neighbors and used their flag, which worked in about 1 minute.....I guess we used the wrong color of fabric....!

Alright, that's it for now. Loving it and loving you guys. I'm only checking email once a week, so I won't get to many replies.

Hope you are doing fabulously!

Love,

Tara

January 11, 2010

Hello again lovelies,

So, it's Panama part dos. It's pouring rain and supposed to be a big storm for today and the next couple of day, which means that a bucket fills up in about 3 seconds. Luckily, Lee and I got off of our island today and to the big island of Bocas for a little escape to the cafe. This was after taking one of the small boats from Bastimentos with a short stop by the Carinero (another local island) surfing point, where we got to roll in a small boat, with no life jackets as one of the surfers just jumps into the water off of the boat and starts paddling. It was awesome, but us New Yorkers have a little voice in our heads 'I'm not sure if this is safe. Really, should they be doing this? I mean this guys seems to know what he's doing, but that's a big wake coming..' It's the same little over-protective and/or incredibly smart voice in our heads that was happy to watch the Panama City fireworks from a far-off rooftop....Anyways, we made it safe to Bocas and are getting food supplies, Lee is fixing his Wikipedia needs as we speak, and having a mocha by the water.

We had a hysterical 'movie-withdrawal' night last night, after a day full of yoga, swimming in the ocean, writing, painting, reading, cooking local fish, and a stroll in the rain forest. We were all set to watch one of our downloaded movies on our spare computer...you know, we'd been creative and fabulously nature-loving for the day and

evening and were ready for a little techy indulgence...Alas, after turning the computer on and off about 20 times (I kid you not), AND doing a little voodoo ritual dance in front of the sickly computer, we gave up. We are movie free. Ahhh. So, we proceeded to devolve into a series of pouting, tickling, and staring at the ocean. Finally, we retired to an hour or two of reading aloud....AFTER pleading with the five cabin resort next door for DVDs.. We're going cold turkey folks...two months, no movies. Unless, of course, they sell bootlegs on Bocas?

So, I was happy to discover today--after getting lost in the jungle for hours on end and sleeping with windows open every night...that we only have one type of poisonous snake on our island. One type of coral snake, that apparently has a small mouth and doesn't care for humans much. Luckily for us, we are not two islands over on Isla Popa, where they have 8 types of venemous snakes, according to the tattered guide books in the cafe. This includes the wonderful fer-de-lance, which is the largest pit viper (up to 7 feet)...awwww, so cute. I think I will avoid that island for a good few years. Until I go completely insane, that is. It was comforting to meet one of our neighbors, Chris, who lives up the hill behind our house in an onclave of a few surfers. He is best described as a stoner surfer from Florida, who does two, maybe three things; surf, eat and smoke weed. Full of riveting conversation, Chris, Lee, Felipe (a local indian who Chris refers to as the 'one arm bandit') and I went to dinner in Old Bank town the other night. After the meal, I realized that the only thing Chris talked about was death and deadly diseases...a sample; he likes to surf in a local place where a guy snapped his neck last year, his friend didn't clean a cut well and it was infested with flesh-eating bacteria similar to leprocy, kill the black scorpions (Felipe didn't when he was young and look what happened to him!), he had to get an IV from food poisoning due to bad restaurants.....It was all good dinner conversation, as you can guess. AND I went directly to the local store to buy more antibacterial lotions and hydrogen peroxide after that.

Now that I have sufficiently scared my mother (all is fine mom, really!), on to other things. We have discovered poison dart frogs. They are endangered and tiny as hell. They also live all over our island and are not poisonous to humans, unless we accidentally eat them, which would be kind of stupid. They are little read guys that live in moist areas on the bottom of trees and they are super cute. Also, we are told that a young sloth lives in our general 'yard-type' area. Somewhere close enough for me to be looking for a sloth every moment. I am still convinced that monkeys are playing tricks on me and hiding in the trees, but have not seen one yet. I was also happy to discover, after being lost in the jungle, that caimans and alligators do live in the freshwater lagoons inland. That being said, I wasn't planning on taking a dip in on of the swamps any time soon. Ahh, the jungle.

I am dead set on a trip around the south eastern coast of our island. Salt Creek has a lot of amazing reefs and is part of the national marine preserve here on Bastimentos. I am planning on taking a boat there, snorkeling for a while, and then getting one of the indians to hike us up to La Loma, which is a little eco-hut resort (with 3 huts)...resort might be pushing it. I had emailed them before I left because they are starting some environmental programs with indian women...and I offered to help out. They were super

excited, but I don't have any strict plans with them, it being the Caribbean and all. Things just happen in 'island-time' here...which means; maybe never. So, I might just show up on their door one of these days, for the fun of it. Also, we just learned that there is an organic farm about 5 minutes walk from us that I'm super excited to check out. Apparently, they are growing all sorts of amazing rare plants there...and I'm excited to learn a little about organic agriculture.

All in all, we are still amazing. I have started 9 paintings in the last week and it does feel like some of you are here with us. I've been doing realistic drawings of loved ones and it's weird to have some of your heads floating around in our tropical bungalow/hut. It's kind of cool, in fact. I envision myself, in my movie-deprived status, talking to your pictures at night and giving you hugs, maybe reading an occasional story or two out loud. that being said, I have a request; Can you send me a passport-esque photo of you in an email attachment? I want one where you are looking directly into the camera, preferably dead-pan, no smile...and close enough so that it is mainly your head and upper shoulders. I only check email once a week...so send it super soon! Then, you too, can be with me in Panama. It's a fun exercise to be drawing portraits again and is trying my patience. Somehow, it doesn't seem creative to be 'copying from life', but I'm determined to get over my little bias.

Anyways, I'm sending my love from across the sea.

Tropical storm, caimans, and all,

Tara

January 30, 2010

Hello Lovelies,

So, a lot has happened since I last wrote. All amazing. Lee and I just returned from four days of a "vacation within a vacation" where we stayed with our new best friends at La Loma, Henry, Margaret and Lucho. I found this place online and they are a truly sustainable small lodge with three huts in the jungle. Henry is a L.A-Peruvian and Margaret is a Brit-American with little Lucho who is a jungle baby galactica! We met them a week ago and just fell in love with both what they are doing and them as people, right away. If you ever come this way....stay with them. We have eaten gourmet local food, talked all night and played all day. AND they are amazing community organizers and advocates for the native Ngobe people. They have developed a project with them to fund and build chicken coops for sustainable egg production, as well as working to develop some micro-enterprises for the women of the area, including a doll project. Before I continue gushing about them.....let me back track a moment to a couple of weeks ago.

Last time I left you, it was pouring buckets and really brewing a major storm. This being said, as I tranquilly emailed you from Bocas (Isla Colon), we still needed to get back to our island to go to sleep. For some reason, Lee and I dilly dallied that day and ending up getting a boat in the evening. Just imagine...it's dark, pouring buckets of water, and you get into a 12 foot boat with what MIGHT be a 17 year old driver who is bucketing water out of the boat as we enter (this happens with every boat, btw). All is great, until we get around the tip of Isla Carenaro (the island between ours and Colon). The water here is not blocked by the islands, so it's much more open...on most days, it's glassy calm or maybe has a few rolling wakes. This night, there were 15-20 foot waves and I was truly SCARED in the ocean for the first time. The best part, as I sat gripping the side of the boat and we were ramming into wave after wave, was that the driver was going towards another island...wayyyyyy out of the way. Lee and I both thought, "great...we get into a boat with one other person and he's taking us on a detour to the next country"...as we both waved our arms and said 'Bastimentos, bastimentos!' the child-driver reassured us that we were going there....Thank goodness too. Apparently, the waves get super big and were actually cresting in the middle of the area, so they have to go all the way around to get to our bay. Anyways, we made it back, it rained for 3 days straight and I have even more respect for boat drivers and the ocean.

After the rains, Lee continued our daily swims and adventures. This includes hiking through the permaculture organic farm nearby...and hearing an earful from Felipe, a local, about how the guy who manages it is 'no good'. It's a cool place though, where he cultivates all fruit and nut trees to sell to others here. It's pretty amazing how much is there and if you didn't know it, you'd just think it's jungle.

In addition to land treks, I have officially established a relationship (sorry Lee) with an Eagle Ray. About 5 times out in our little ocean bay, I have seen glimpses of a ray. Usually it has been a bit cloudy, so I see a small corner of it and can't really tell the size, etc. However, the other day, I went out and it was crystal clear...suddenly I look and there it is--about 5 feet across and at least 9 feet long with it's tail and spike. It was about 10 feet from me and just swimming along. If you haven't seen one underwater, they are one of the most majestic creatures ever. So, careful to not end up like Steve Erwin, I swam alongside it for a while, whatching it fly underwater. Beyond that, I have seen hundreds of types of tropical fish, barracuda, green eel, spiny lobster, a baby ray, sea cucumbers and more...It's so amazing. I also had a little yellow fish follow me for about an hour, which was hysterical. It swam with us all around the bay and would swim right in front of my goggles the whole time as I swam, circling me when I stood up. Maybe it was the bathing suit?

Since this one is the friendly animal email, I will move onto our house pets. Since being here, we officially have two dogs (affectionately called Dog Dog and Whimp Dog) who sit at our doorstep and follow us around most days. If I happen to come out and they are not there, I whistle and here mad barking from off in the distance as they come Mad Maxish down the hill to our house. We feed them bacon grease and left overs, so that might be the reason for their excitement, but needless to say they are great. Some of the coolest mutt dogs I've ever met and it's fun to have them around. Other than that, we

have geckos...I always forget, no matter how many times I come to the tropics, about the little geckos. They live in your house and literally stick to the walls...AND they eat misquitos and other pests, so they are amazing. I will often sit and stare at them for up to 30 minutes at a time, watching them catch bugs. Occassionally, you even hear a loud thump of one of them losing their grip and falling to the floor....Other than those pets, I have started a compost pile in our "yard", which is sure to encourage other visitors. Here are a few tips:

Composting (and worm) Secrets from the Tropics:

- * Compost piles here disappear within about 3 days....unrecognizable
- * The cure for bug infestations of any kind--especially fruit flies--GECKOS! I am so excited to recommend this at our next composting class in NYC!
- * Compost toilets are the way forward. we should all get them!
- * Worms in Jackfish are really cool looking, but don't pull them out of the fish in front of the guests and before cooking the meat.....
- * No one wants worms in their feet (thanks Barbados for that lesson!)

Okay, so I think now we're ready to go back to La Loma. After being invited out to lunch at La Loma last week, Henry and Margaret invited us to stay this week with them, learn about their work, and hopefully start a long-term friendship and enviro-partnership (bet they didn't know they were in for that!). Their place is on our island, but about a 30 minute boatride through the mangrove forest to get there. Unlike our place, they are truly out in the jungle and surrounded by unbelievable wildlife. They also grow many local fruits and make their own chocolate....soooo good.

Lee and I get to our cabin, which has no walls to the outside and settle in Imagine being raise up into the rainforest on stilts, with no walls, just trees as your curtains and a huge harem-esque misquito net in the middle covering your bed. I truly felt like a princess the whole time. Not only that, H&M insisted on spoiling us like all of the other guests and bringing coffee, muffins and tea in the mornings delivered to our doorstep....craziness!

The first night there, we went to bed and heard incredibly loud rustlings around the house. Jumping out of bed, I yell-whispered 'monkeys!' and we ran for the headlamp (thanks caroline!). Needless to say....I have seen wild monkeys in Panama now. There were about 5 of them all around the house, little with brown heads, and they just hung out and looked around for the most part. I couldn't resist from making stupid monkey noises, while Lee hushed me. I still maintain that I have an uncanny ability to speak to the animals. It didn't seem to work, but I must have gotten at least some of my message through because they didn't bite me, this time. (That's another story from Holland, I'll have to tell you some time....)

After a few days of learning about the wonderful work going on at La Loma and hanging out with new friends, learning about the catastrophic attempts of hyper-development by mostly Americans down here...picture a tropical rainforest turning into a golf course,

cookie cutter McMansions and a Jurassic Park themed water park and marina?! I kid you not. Luckily, it has been fought by the indigenous of Bastimentos, with La Loma being very active in the whole thing...Really, though, it's horrific that that would even be a possibility...So, I digress: we come to today, our last day we spent at La Loma.

As many of you know, I have eaten meat all of my life and, although I have never done it, I have always believed that I should be able to kill what I eat. So, the opportunity arose....the Rooster. One of Henry and Margaret's roosters has gradually been asserting itself more and more and attacking people. After one of the locals told Margaret a story about a child being disfigured by a rooster, they decided he had to go. I, of course, got excited and pleaded with them to let me be there and or do it. Needless to say, after looking at the large rooster and then the machete, then back at the rooster, I decided just to watch closely this time...I'm ready though, for next time (Henry, I await your call). I did completely pluck the bird after watching the decapitated body run around for a few minutes (SOOOO weird if you haven't seen one).. I actually found myself asking if it was still alive, even though the head was clearly detached...! So, we ate chicken for lunch. It was very good and I have videos of the beheading for all of my curious city dwellers and soon-to-be vegetarians.

What else? Well, if I thought I was relaxed before, I am more so now. If you don't do it yet: get out, get away and live life fully! It's amazing to see the world, get perspective on our lives and on the world through this type of experience. If you haven't ever been to a developing country, I think it should be an imperative for everyone. There is so much to learn about what we have, what we don't have, and what we just might not want to have any more. As always, I am learning so much from the wonderful people we are meeting, the times, and from a lot of observing. I look forward to further developing friendships and sharing more with you all soon.