

On My Mind
4/16/04

Of the nearly two dozen islands I have visited in my lifetime - in both the Atlantic/Caribbean and the Pacific - Rota stands out as the most effectively and deliberately designed to please its visitor.

Having just returned from a three-day stay at Rota's Coconut Village - my first trip, I'm embarrassed to say, in more than ten years - I have to say I was totally enchanted, thoroughly impressed. Except in the villages themselves, all of the island visible from its paved roads is as perfectly groomed as a horticultural exhibit.

Every single paved road - that we saw - is lined on both sides with blossoming plumeria trees. Some are interspersed with colorful bougainvillea, some with bright red hibiscus. The road to the airport has all three - a wonderful symphony of color! At intervals along the roads are circlets of flower gardens, trimmed in rock.

We visited most of the major tourist sites, though somehow we got lost among the coral roads - all of which showed signs of recent scraping and clearing - trying to find Mochong Latte Stone Village. Thanks to helpful directional signs, we did manage to find the Bird Sanctuary and Latte Stone Quarry (those for the Mochong site seemed to be missing). Yet we found only two discarded aluminum cans, no other trash of any kind, and no graffiti in all our wanderings.

The dump is not visible. Outside the village limits, there are no warehouses or garages or auto dealers or random merchants or unkempt fields or restaurants or beauty parlors or poker parlors - except one providentially located market/laundromat near the airport - littering the roadside. - The few hotels along the shore are low-profile, off-set from the road, also landscaped.

Though many individuals, organizations and agencies are working hard at beautifying Saipan - and their efforts are gratifying - given the damage caused by its uncontrolled growth, I don't believe that Saipan, with all its commercialism, will ever be able to match the unspoiled beauty Rota offers.

The dedication and hard work by the people of Rota, and the Mayor and his staff, in developing and maintaining Rota as the garden isle of the Commonwealth is very much in evidence, and they've every right to be proud of their accomplishments. Though, not being terribly athletic, we did not sample Rota's other tourist attractions - golf, scuba, snorkeling or fishing - still we had a wonderful, interesting and relaxing stay - and would recommend it to all and sundry as a great get-away.

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I should mention the Marianas Visiting Authority as well, while handing out kudos. Its free map and tourist guide to Rota is outstanding. The guide to Rota's tourist sites was very helpful as were the street maps for the villages. We found the full-size page depicting Rota's birds particularly useful both for use at Rota's impressive Bird Sanctuary, and elsewhere.

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Before Northern Marianas College goes too much further with the idea of converting the Fiesta Mall into a college campus, it might want to consult with a traffic/design engineer as to whether the Mall's many split levels and convoluted walk ways can be re-arranged enough to serve as a campus, and if so, how much it would cost to devise coherent traffic flow. Just the cost of making the place accessible to the handicapped would seem enormous.

A move in the right direction is the call by NMC's interim president to lower tuition fees for foreign students. As conceived by the former NMC president, only by charging high tuition fees to foreign students would the college be able to maintain and expand its operation. But the idea of relying on peripherals (i.e., the language program for foreign students) to support the main purpose of the college (educating resident students) has always struck me as amoral if not irrational. Tony DeLeon Guerrero's intention to ask NMC's Board of Regents to lower the fee seems much more honorable.

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I am grateful to Yvonne R. Gomez for her reasoned rebuttal to comments in my 4/02 column in which I criticized the "Little Miss NMI" contest as depriving early elementary school-age girls of their childhood. She provided a great deal of information in her letter to the editor last week - information that I had not had when I wrote my column. Information, more to the point, that had not appeared in the press previously.

I had based my comments on what I found, which was a picture of young girls in two-piece bathing suits striking what I considered a "come-hither" pose (Gomez called it "standing in proper position (like young ladies)"). The caption gave none of the additional information about the contest that Gomez provided in her letter, nor did the accompanying story. It is true that I might have called to obtain more data. As I see it, however, the issue here is that most readers don't and won't do that - they rely on what appears in the paper. And the paper fails in its responsibilities when it does not provide a balanced, unbiased story.

I was gullible. I did not call. And I thank Ms. Gomez for filling in the details the paper neglected to mention.

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Short takes:

- Maybe the bank suing Marine Revitalization Corp could just take over the Outer Cove Marina in settlement of its claim? That would relieve Tony Pellegrino of his debt, relieve the CNMI of its obligation, and provide an asset allegedly worth some \$3,000,000 to the bank.

- I liked Gonzalo Santos' idea (it appeared in his letter to the editor in the 4/13 issue of the <I>Variety</I>) that the ballots and ballot boxes be colored depending on the position being sought - all House ballots blue, Senate ballots red, etc. Of course, that could mean using more

paper, but if it makes sorting easier? I also liked his idea of using pictures of the candidates. Faces are usually easier to remember than names..... He has a great sense of humor, but in this case, he deserves to be taken seriously.

- I asked Don Farrell, local salesman for the Azmar proposal to mine Pagan ash, what would happen to Pagan's lovely black sand beach near the village. "Will that be turned into a commercial harbor?" I asked. His response: "I can't speak officially on this because I really don't know the answer. However, your guess seems logical to me. The question we have to ask ourselves and CNMI citizens, is the loss of the black sand beach equal to the millions of dollars in revenue it will create for the citizens of the CNMI? "

Ah, but once destroyed, the black sand beach will be gone forever. If mining on Pagan is permitted, so must re-settlement by the displaced Northern Islanders. And without that beach, they will have no place to safely enter the water - to fish, to swim, to launch their boats. Surely some other less environmentally damaging harbor site can be found, instead.

- It's not a law yet but at the rate that flame trees, breadfruit trees and other bird-feeding and subsistence-supporting trees are being destroyed of late, seems like it would be more than merely a good idea if there were a law mandating that for every tree destroyed, a another would have to be planted to take its place. Not necessarily at the same identical place, but somewhere on-island where it could be expected to grow to maturity.

Among other things, trees protect against erosion, absorb carbon dioxide, beautify vistas, provide habitat to wildlife, shade to humans, and nourishment to both.

- The Attorney General's office has ruled that the Saipan local delegation's action in suspending the zoning law - taken some ten years ago - was invalid. The only solution, however, is not to now carry out the requirements of the zoning law - as the ruling claims. There is an alternative. The legislature could enact a law giving the local delegation authority to act on zoning legislation - which would enable it to carry out its original intent to suspend the zoning law, and which would rectify the error that the AG ruling claims occurred. Enacting a ten-year-old law is fraught with risk.

- Words to ponder: "Terrorism is a tactic. It is not an enemy." written by <i>International Herald Tribune</i> op-ed writer Bob Kerry in its 4/13/04 issue. In the same piece, Kerry also wrote, regarding sending more U.S. troops to Iraq, and/or extending the deadline for the turn-over of power, "Time is not on our side. We do not need a little more of the same thing. We need a lot more of something completely different." (His solution: an international occupation including Muslim and Arab forces.)