

Colombian gem

A psychiatrist discovers a secluded isle beloved of local families and scuba divers

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY *Dr Brad Bowins*

An island that is safe, warm and inviting to visitors, and floating isolated in the ocean, naturally touches the soul. San Andrés Island off the coast of Central America is

such a place. When people learn that it is part of Colombia, they often think of drug dealers, based on how this country is portrayed in the media.

But San Andrés is a quiet island that serves as a family vacation destination for mainlanders. The archipelago of San Andrés and Providence is located 750 kilometres northwest of Colombia, and isn't even close to the mother country.

Having travelled throughout most of the Caribbean, I was struck by how

unique this island is. In some destinations the warmth doesn't extend much beyond the locals and safety is a concern. Not on San Andrés. The atmosphere is very family oriented. Frequently, we noticed fathers out alone with their small children, actively engaging the kids in play.


We found walking through the main town and waterfront safe at all hours of the day and night. The most eyebrow-raising person we encountered was a colourful young man, probably with a less than ideally treated mental illness, who by day shouted to himself, and by night transformed into a reggae singer entertaining tourists. Could there be a new treatment for schizophrenia somewhere in this story?

The local police were ever present, and didn't tolerate any behaviour that put tourists at risk. Although the local language is Spanish, we found that most shop owners knew some English, and if that failed someone would help out spontaneously. English speaking guests are almost always Canadians, given that most Americans have written the country off due to its reputation.

The waterfront in the main town is well thought out, with a long and leisurely walkway, palm trees and a public beach. Extending from the waterfront is a pedestrian-only section containing appealing shops. The town itself is unique in that transportation is almost exclusively by motorcycle. We saw parents with one or two children commuting on a single motorbike.

The over-water restaurant at Los Delfines is perfect for a quiet lunch.





This remote archipelago is a stopover for migrating sea turtles.

Beach lovers might be disappointed to hear that San Andrés Island lacks natural beaches. But the cays inside the lagoon have all the soft white sand you could ask for

WHO MOVED THE BEACH?

Beach lovers might be disappointed to hear that due to its rocky coast, San Andrés Island lacks natural beaches. But the cays inside the lagoon more than make up for that. They have all the fine white sand you ever dreamed of, and the very short boat ride across the sheltered lagoon is free from most Decameron Hotels. Being more adventurous, as well as experienced kayakers, we opted to provide our own transportation.

On our first outing we headed relatively far to the Acuario and Haynes Cays, linked by a barely submerged sandbar. Kayaking over the relatively calm aquamarine waters of the lagoon, looking down at the shallow sandy bottom and schools of small fish was an exhilarating experience. We had Acuario to ourselves until the afternoon tourist shuttles arrived.

On Haynes Cay, small stingrays came to shore, and guests on special snorkelling tours can observe and even feed these incredible creatures. The very unfortunate

passing of Steve Irwin from a stingray barb to the heart has created the impression that these animals are dangerous. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I can say this from personal experience diving with them and feeding them on numerous occasions. In one instance, I untangled a fishing line from a large ray, and it could easily have stabbed me but let itself be freed from the line wrapped around its head.

The greatest risk occurs when swimmers accidentally step on a ray. To save itself from what it perceives as a shark attack, the ray will thrust its barb into the

swimmer's leg. A nasty injury for sure, but not fatal. And if you look before you step or sweep your foot across the bottom, it won't occur. Using a snorkel mask ensures that stingrays are clearly seen. And watching the ray's huge pectoral fins rippling to propel it ever so gracefully through the water is an experience not to be missed. And here, the rays were in a mere metre of water!

LOST AT SEA

Our excursion inadvertently tested our hotel staff's attention to safety. We were on our way back from the cays when a jet ski approached. Two water sports staff thought we had gone missing, since very few guests take the kayaks for more than an hour or so, and they were searching for us.

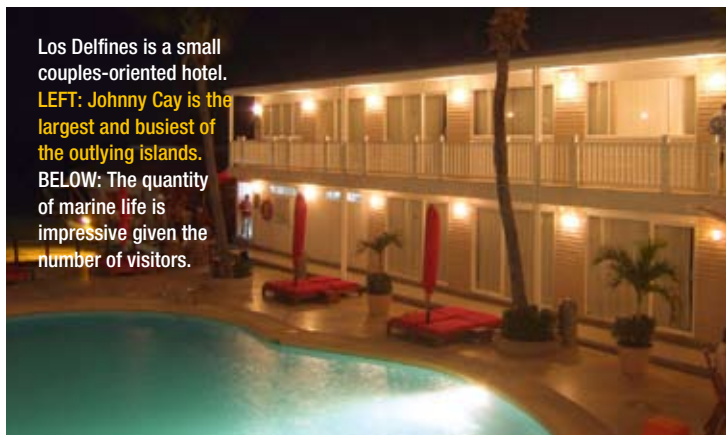
On our next excursion to Johnny Cay we informed them not to check for us until just before sunset. Given that kayaking is within the lagoon it would be hard to get lost. But it's great that they are so safety conscious.

**Our best gift
guide ever!**

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Los Delfines is a small couples-oriented hotel. LEFT: Johnny Cay is the largest and busiest of the outlying islands. BELOW: The quantity of marine life is impressive given the number of visitors.



Johnny Cay was an experience of a different type. It was filled with crowds of day-trippers and some intense sun-worshipping. Despite the Roman Catholic culture and no-topless policy on beaches, thongs are very much in style and leave nothing worth mentioning to the imagination. The bathing suit shops in town carry all types of thongs, ranging from no material to barely any.

Away from the hot display of flesh on the beach, the coconut- and palm-tree-shaded interior of the isle had food and drink available for purchase, including fresh coconut milk you savour right from the shell. The coconut vendor was a colourful Rastafarian who left Africa several years ago and fell in love with San Andrés. That is the charm of the island and surrounding cays. Johnny Cay, although perhaps the largest, is so small that it only takes 15 minutes to walk around — maybe a little more if you include the time to navigate between tanning bodies.

San Andrés is a watery paradise with

TAKE THE PLUNGE

Travel to San Andrés Island is easy with direct flights from Toronto and Montreal offered as part of package vacations from **Nolitours** (tel: 866-556-3948; www.nolitours.com), Air Transat's travel company. Flights are only about five hours, with a short cab ride to your chosen hotel. Plus, Air Transat doesn't charge for sports equipment and allows an extra bag for this purpose — very useful for scuba divers.

Rates are in the \$1200 range for an all-inclusive week at three- to four-star hotels. All the hotels offered are part of **Decameron Hotels** (www.decameron.com), and you can arrange to have dinner at the other properties for variety.

Since there are few sand beaches on San Andrés itself, it's not worth selecting a hotel based on the beach. We selected **Los Delfines**, a small recently renovated property right by the water-

front and town. This hotel caters more to couples; its air-conditioned rooms were clean and tastefully decorated, and the à la carte restaurant over the water was ideal for intimate dinners and relaxing lunches. Although near town, the hotel was very quiet, other than Friday and Saturday night, when competing strains of Latin music from a few restaurants went on almost to sunrise.

Visitors more interested in activities right at their hotel will prefer other Decameron properties, such as the **Aquarium** with its distinct circular buildings spread over the water. It's a busy resort with several restaurants, supervised activities, plus a number of water-sport options.

Those looking for scuba excursions or getting PADI certified with a genial and reassuring instructor should contact Werner Koester at **Karibik Diver** (www.karibikdiver.com).

*There is relatively little to see on land.
The real draw is scuba diving, as the archipelago is part
of one of the largest reef systems in the world*



The gentle underwater topography and calm surface conditions are ideal for novice divers.

Brad Bowins is a psychiatrist working in private practice as well as at the University of Toronto Health Service. He began scuba diving when he was 15 and has completed over 1000 dives, most devoted to underwater photography. In addition to his Caribbean trips, he has explored the undersea riches of the Maldives, Egypt, the South Pacific and Southeast Asia.

relatively little to see on land. It is on and below the water where it all happens. There is sailing, jet skiing, windsurfing, and other options available, most free of charge. However, the real draw is scuba diving, as the archipelago of San Andrés and Providence is part of one of the largest reef systems in the world.

The islands and cays are all low islands, derived from exposed coral. On San Andrés, there is great diving on the protected west side where there is virtu-

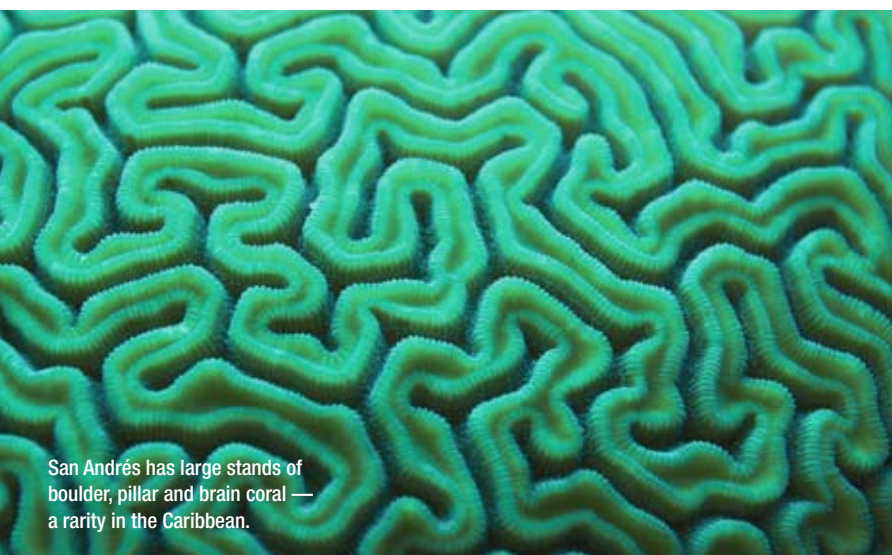
ally no wave action. The reefs extend right from the shore and gradually slope down, other than a few sections where mini-walls drop straight down for tens of metres.

The gentle underwater topography and surface conditions of San Andrés are ideal for novice divers, providing a safe and easy-to-navigate environment for learning scuba. My partner completed her entire PADI scuba course during the week we were there. Before leaving for our trip, we had selected Karibik Diver, run by Werner Koester.

A German running a scuba operation in San Andrés sounded unusual and, true to form, Koester turned out to be quite a character. He surprised us by showing up at the airport to meet us. Other than fairly limited numbers of European visitors, Canadians are his primary business and he appreciates us. He provided very thorough, safe and relaxing instruction.

When learning something completely new, such as scuba diving, some nervousness is understandable and healthy. But I have seen scuba instructors create more tension, worsening the nerves felt by the newbie. My partner found Koester to be very reassuring

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San Andrés has large stands of boulder, pillar and brain coral — a rarity in the Caribbean.

tolerability, the dose may be increased to 150 mg BID (300 mg/day) after one week. For patients who experience significant and ongoing pain and can tolerate pregabalin 300 mg/day well, a maximum daily dose of 600 mg (300 mg twice a day, BID) may be considered.

Administration: LYRICA is given orally with or without food.

Supplemental Product Information

Special Populations: Geriatrics (≥65 years of age): Pregabalin oral clearance tended to decrease with increasing age. This decrease in pregabalin oral clearance is consistent with age-related decreases in creatinine clearance. Reduction of pregabalin dose may be required in patients who have age-related compromised renal function (see Product Monograph, **WARNINGS AND PRECAUTIONS, Geriatrics >65 years of age**).

Pregnant Women: There are no adequate and well-controlled studies in pregnant women. Pregabalin should be used during pregnancy only if the potential benefit justifies the potential risk to the fetus.

Labour and Delivery: The effects of pregabalin on labour and delivery in pregnant women are unknown.

Nursing Women: It is not known if pregabalin is excreted in human breast milk; however, it is present in the milk of rats. Because of the potential for adverse reactions in nursing infants from pregabalin, a decision should be made whether to discontinue nursing or to discontinue the drug, taking into account the importance of the drug to the mother.

Pediatrics (<18 years of age): The safety and efficacy of pregabalin in pediatric patients (<18 years of age) have not been established and its use in this patient population is not recommended (see Product Monograph, **WARNINGS AND PRECAUTIONS, Pediatrics**).

WARNINGS AND PRECAUTIONS: See the Product Monograph for further information on the following: tumorigenic potential, ophthalmological effects, peripheral edema, congestive heart failure, weight gain, dizziness and somnolence, sexual function/reproduction, and special populations.

DRUG INTERACTIONS

Overview: Since pregabalin is predominately excreted unchanged in the urine, undergoes negligible metabolism in humans (<2% of a dose recovered in urine as metabolites), does not inhibit drug metabolism in vitro, and is not bound to plasma proteins, LYRICA (pregabalin) is unlikely to produce, or be subject to, pharmacokinetic interactions.

Drug Abuse and Dependence/Liability: Pregabalin is not known to be active at receptor sites associated with drugs of abuse. As with any CNS active drug, physicians should carefully evaluate patients for history of drug abuse and observe them for signs of LYRICA misuse or abuse (e.g., development of tolerance, dose escalation, drug-seeking behaviour).

ADMINISTRATION

Dosage Adjustment Based on Renal Function: Dosing adjustment should be based on creatinine clearance (Cl_c), as indicated in Table 1.

Pregabalin is effectively removed from plasma by hemodialysis. Over a 4-hour hemodialysis treatment, plasma pregabalin concentrations are reduced by approximately 50%. For patients receiving hemodialysis, pregabalin daily dose should be adjusted based on renal function. In addition to the daily dose adjustment, a supplemental dose should be given immediately following every 4-hour hemodialysis treatment (see Table below).

Table 1. Pregabalin Dosage Adjustment Based on Renal Function

Creatinine Clearance (Cl _c) (mL/min)	Total Pregabalin Daily Dose (mg/day) ^a Recommended Dose Escalation ^a			Dose Regimen
	Starting dose		Maximum daily dose	
≥60	150	300	600	BID or TID
30-60	75	150	300	BID or TID
15-30	25-50	75	150	QD or BID
<15	25	25-50	75	QD
Supplementary dosage following hemodialysis (mg) ^b				
Patients on the 25 mg QD regimen: take one supplemental dose of 25 mg or 50 mg				
Patients on the 25-50 mg QD regimen: take one supplemental dose of 50 mg or 75 mg				
Patients on the 75 mg QD regimen: take one supplemental dose of 100 mg or 150 mg				

TID = Three divided doses; BID = Two divided doses; QD = Single daily dose.

^a Based on individual patient response and tolerability.

^b Total daily dose (mg/day) should be divided as indicated by dose regimen to provide mg/dose.

^c Supplementary dose is a single additional dose.

OVERDOSAGE

Signs, Symptoms and Laboratory Findings of Acute Overdosage in Humans: The highest known dose of pregabalin received in the clinical development program was 15,000 mg in 1 patient. The types of adverse events experienced by patients who received an overdose were not clinically different from other patients receiving recommended doses of pregabalin.

Treatment or Management of Overdose: There is no specific antidote for overdose with pregabalin. If indicated, elimination of unabsorbed drug may be attempted by emesis or gastric lavage; usual precautions should be observed to maintain the airway. General supportive care of the patient is indicated including monitoring of vital signs and observation of the clinical status of the patient. A Certified Poison Control Center should be contacted for up-to-date information on the management of overdose with pregabalin.

Hemodialysis: Standard hemodialysis procedures result in significant clearance of pregabalin (approximately 50% in 4 hours) and should be considered in cases of overdose. Although hemodialysis has not been performed in the few known cases of overdose, it may be indicated by the patient's clinical state or in patients with significant renal impairment.

AVAILABILITY OF DOSAGE FORMS

LYRICA is available in dosage strengths of 25 mg, 50 mg, 75 mg, 100 mg,* 150 mg, 200 mg,* 225 mg,* and 300 mg capsules.

* Not commercially available in Canada

For a copy of the Product Monograph or full Prescribing Information, please contact: Pfizer Canada Medical Information at 1-800-463-6001 or visit www.pfizer.ca.



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Member



I prescribe a trip to... San Andrés Island

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and calming. His sense of humour, including putting on white Elton John-style sunglasses found floating underwater, was also an asset. He went through the required skills and let her progress at the pace that was right for her, while distracting her by showing the many sea creatures.

Having marine biology as a hobby and having completed over a thousand dives, many of them in the Caribbean, I have witnessed firsthand the steady demise of our reefs due to global warming, and problems such as excess nitrogen which promotes algae growth.

Throughout the entire Caribbean, previously healthy hard corals are over-run by algae, and it is rare to see large stands of boulder, pillar, and brain coral, named for its contours that resemble the surface structure of a brain. San Andrés does have algae overgrowth, but a lot less than I have witnessed elsewhere in the Caribbean.

I encountered large stands of intact hard coral and took photographs that unfortunately might prove to be archival in a few years. Perhaps it is the remote location of the San Andrés and Providence Archipelago, or the limited agriculture with nitrogen runoff that accounts for the difference. I suggest that people visit in the next few years while the hard corals are still in good shape.

The reefs beyond San Andrés Island are largely unexplored. Koester offers an interesting option when the seas are calmer, usually starting in March, where he takes a limited number of guests to spend the night on Providence and dive the reefs. This would certainly be an interesting trip for the more adventurous.

San Andrés Island has much to recommend it for an incredible price. From my perspective as an avid diver, the island is well worth seeing for its healthy Caribbean hard corals. The stingrays and tropical fish are present in sizable numbers given the island's relatively large population of locals and visitors. In many ways, though, the most exceptional aspect was the friendly and safe feel of the island. Considering all the unique aspects of San Andrés, you can see why it truly touches and invigorates the soul. 