

Petticoat Juncture  
Ah beauty, with feet of clay.

"I HAD A POSTER OF THIS TAHITIAN GIRL HANGING OVER my bed all through college," Drew said. He described her in detail: She's coming out of the ocean, topless, of course, wearing a bright sarong wrapped lazy and low around her hips. Her gold-brown skin glistens with coconut oil and drops of water drizzle down her arms, her chest, her belly. A red hibiscus is tucked in her ebony hair. She's smiling at Drew and she's walking right toward him. How he ever fell asleep at night is beyond me.

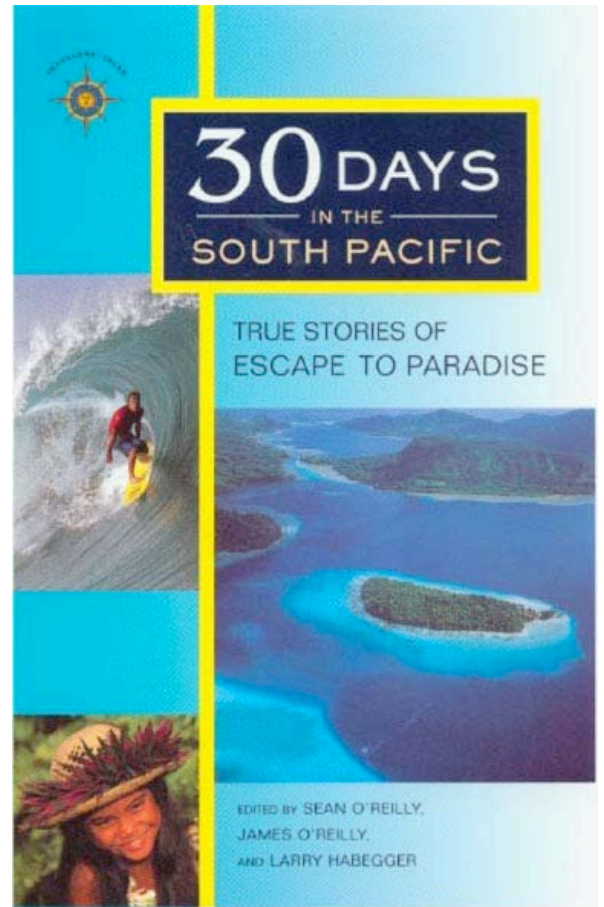
We were straight-off-the-plane Peace Corps volunteers, leaning on the gunnels of a rusted World War II landing craft, chugging across the Truk Lagoon and wondering what sort of parallel universe we were about to enter. Most of the volunteers were freshly minted college graduates, many were newly married, and about a dozen were single guys and girls.

Drew wasn't the only one suffering from island fever, lusting and fantasizing, hoping to get lucky. All the single guys, and no doubt many of the married men, had the same high definition Technicolor scene running through their heads.

Drew wanted to be sucked into the Tahitians' world, enveloped in green and turquoise. But mostly he fantasized about falling in love with an island beauty—for two years or forever, whichever came first. When he sent in his Peace Corps application and was asked where he'd like to serve, he checked every island group on the roster: Samoa, Fiji, the Philippines, and Micronesia. Tahiti wasn't on the menu, but in Drew's mind, the requisite brown-skinned beauty could be found, waiting, on any South Pacific island.

Truth be told, before we got our posting, few of us knew where Micronesia was, let alone Truk (now called Chuuk). To find it, I dusted off my atlas, found Hawaii then traced the longitude lines south to Tahiti where I thought I'd find Micronesia. It wasn't there. The Pacific became a very large body of water as my fingers ran west across the blue. There it was, just above the equator, nearly in the Philippines. No wonder my Mom was so freaked out.

"Micronesia" means "tiny islands" and over two thousand of them stretch across a swath of the Pacific Ocean the size of the continental United States. Six districts, each with its own language, dance, and customs. Nearly five different landscapes as well\*the flat, sand spit Marshalls; rain-drenched high islands of Ponape; Chuuk with its forty-mile-wide lagoon dotted with a smattering of densely jungled islands; Yap, most traditional of all where the men wore loincloths and the women were topless; the Northern Marianas, which our fathers knew as the launching pad for the *Enola Gay*; and Palau, so beautiful it would eventually become the centerpiece of a reality television show.



The Chuuk Lagoon is so big that from the center you can't see its fringing reef. It's so big the Japanese anchored their fleet of destroyers and troopships and aircraft carriers here during World War II. It's so big it could swallow a Peace Corps volunteer whole. And it has.

In the late 1960s, with an eye toward the future when Micronesia, then the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, would gain independence, the United States sent a secret weapon to Micronesia: Peace Corps volunteers. Our overt mission was to live among the islanders, teach them English, work in the hospitals and government offices, put in water systems, and improve sanitation. In the process, our government hoped we'd spread good will and win a few hearts and minds.

But it was the end of the '60s and Uncle Sam was nearly as naive as we were. They hadn't bargained on the fact that they were sending a whole contingent of draft-dodging, rebelrousing, potsmoking idealists who would just as quickly damn their country as praise it. But that's another story. This is Drew's tale.

He was from Connecticut and had just graduated from an Ivy League college with a degree in history. His father wanted him to go to law school step into the family practice and was appalled at this two-year detour. I detected blue blood. Drew's Peace Corps job would be teaching English as a second language and as a single man, he would be sent to one of the remote outer islands. His optimism was infectious, and even though the rolling landing craft was making me queasy and the sun was beginning to blister my shoulders, I was just as prickly with excitement.

One of the Chuukese interpreters pointed ahead. "That island's Fefan, it means woman in Chuukese. Can you see her?" A robust figure reclined dead ahead, a Rubenesque giant clothed in green. Drew was sure he'd found nirvana.

But it was only Fefan, where we'd live with local families for a month, learn the Chuukese language, and get daily reality lessons. Some of us would be "deselected," deemed too unstable or immature or otherwise wacky to be trusted as an emissary to a foreign country. And some of us would opt-out on our own after a few weeks of bathing in a bucket, peeing in an outhouse on stilts over the ocean, scratching mosquito bites till they bled, squishing tablespoon-sized cockroaches, and surviving on a diet of breadfruit, rice, and Spam.

None of this deterred Drew. He took to the new language effortlessly, learned how to spearfish, and got a solid tan. He spent hours sitting with the Chuukese men and flirted outrageously with the girls. George, Clark, and Ed, volunteers who were finishing up their two-year Peace Corps assignments and were spending the summer as our mentors and teachers, told stories of volunteers who "married" Chuukese girls for the duration of their stay. "They love Americans," dark said. "Yeah, they hope you'll really marry them and take them back to the States, but if you don't, and as long as you stay on the dad's good side, it's O.K. to take a Chuukese wife. Really."

When training was over. Drew packed his duffle bag and headed solo to an outer island with a population of less than one hundred. The island had no electricity, drinking water was scooped from rain catchments, and his contact with the Peace Corps office would be a monthly grocery list he'd call in on the single-side-band radio. When, and if, he needed to hang out with other volunteers, he'd ride all day long in an open motorboat across the lagoon to the district center, Moen.

It took about six months before Drew needed a cold beer and a collegial atmosphere. "Well, did you find your island princess?" I teased. He led into his answer by talking about, of all things, petticoats. Thanks, or no thanks, to a strong missionary influence decades earlier, Chuukese girls were a lot more modest than Drew's topless Tahitian. They wore Puritan-inspired cotton dresses with square necks, puffed sleeves, full skirts, and fitted waists. The missionary mold broke wide open in the fabric choices though; riotous floral prints in hothouse colors. Under these graceful but modest confections they wore white cotton petticoats that were always two or three inches longer than the skirts, edged in bright rows of crocheted yarn.

"I had my eye on this really pretty girl from day one," he said. He told me she would walk down the beach past his hut every evening, giggling with her sister, teasing him with a mixture of shy and bold. All the signals were there. He was sure his fantasy was about to become reality.

On the evening Drew planned to make his move, he sat on a coconut log wondering what sort of pick-up line could possibly work in paradise. She walked toward him and, seeming to read his mind, smiled in that universal language that says "yes." Drew's stomach fluttered, he smiled back. Just then she reached down, took hold of the edge of the petticoat and lifted it to her face. With a most unfeminine snort, she enthusiastically blew her nose.

*Linda Hagen Miller lived in Micronesia and Guam for nearly twenty years and credits her Peace Corps stint with kindling a passion for travel that has never left her. She now lives, writes, and travels from Spokane, Washington.*