

Name: _____ Class: _____

Sailing to San Blas

An American family learns about life among the Kuna Indians.

By Claudia Lee-Ottman
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Claudia Lee-Ottman has written for Highlights. In this memoir, Lee-Ottman describes her experience sailing to San Blas with her family and meeting the Kuna Indians. As you read, take notes on what Lee-Ottman and her family learn from the Kuna Indians.

- [1] "Put on your life jackets! Everyone on deck. This area is filled with reefs that can damage our boat," calls my husband. "Hayley, take watch at the bow¹ with your mother. Jackson, check the radar and watch the depth meter."

We are sailing toward the San Blas archipelago, a chain of more than 360 islands in the Caribbean Sea, stretching along the coast of Panama in Central America. As captain, my husband reads the nautical charts, or ocean maps, and uses our longitude and latitude position like a street map to steer us where we want to go.



"Kuna Indians can dive down 40 feet and catch a lobster with their bare hands." by John P. Ottman is used with permission.

"Dad, depth is 10 meters, and radar shows something two miles ahead," Jackson reports.

Hayley and I look at the sea. We watch for color changes in the water or breaking white waves. This can mean that the water depth is changing or that a reef is near the surface. If we see something, we may need to alter our course to avoid a collision.²

- [5] "Dad, there's a boat!" Hayley exclaims.

Three men, far out at sea, are in a dugout canoe called a *cayuco*. We pull up near them. They paddle over and offer to sell us a *langosta*, a spiny lobster, but they have not caught enough for each of us.

"Un momento, por favor" (one moment, please), the man says.

He dives overboard, holding his breath, goes down 40 feet, and comes back up with another langosta in his bare hands! We buy the langostas and visit with the men. These expert divers and fishermen are Kuna Indians from the San Blas Islands.

1. the front end of a ship
2. **Collision (noun):** an act or instance of crashing

Keeping Traditions Alive

The islands have tropical jungles that are surrounded by white beaches that disappear into warm turquoise water. The islands' people, the Kuna Indians, have made the area famous because of their efforts to protect their rain forests, their independence, and their culture.

- [10] For more than 400 years, the Kuna Indians have fought to keep their traditional way of life. They've formed their own system of government and laws. They've kept the Kuna language, though many speak Spanish, too. And while visitors are welcome, non-Kuna people are not allowed to own land.

A Kuna woman paddles her cayuco out to greet us and shows us her *molos*. In Kuna, *mola* means "clothing" or "blouse" and is part of the Kuna women's traditional dress.

We invite the woman aboard and buy a few of her *molos*. Then we ask if we can take a photo of her. We have heard that it is disrespectful to photograph a Kuna person without permission and we want to honor the customs of the Kuna people.

Village Life

Once we are on the island, we visit the *sahila*, or chief. It is an important part of Kuna culture for a visitor to receive an invitation and pay a fee to the *sahila* before entering his village.

We walk around the village and look at the way the Kuna people live. Their homes have dirt floors, and reeds or canes form the sides. Roofs are built with thatched palm fronds.³ Family huts for sleeping and cooking often surround a common courtyard. Kuna villages vary in size. They can range from a few dwellings⁴ to large villages with some modern conveniences. On this island some of the Kuna are relaxing in hammocks for *siesta*, or rest. We decide to return to our boat and relax.

- [15] Hayley and Jackson are being homeschooled while we are traveling on our boat. Part of our homeschool day is spent learning about the countries and people we visit. Earlier today we read about Kuna foods and money. The Kuna eat a lot of fish, langostas, plantains,⁵ and coconuts. The coconut (*ogob*) is also used for money. Each coconut tree has a Kuna owner, so the coconuts cannot be taken or touched. Today, Kuna people use Panama's *balboa*⁶ and United States dollars for money, too.

After we rest, Jackson and Hayley go swimming. They dive for langostas and think of ways to collect fresh rainwater. They try to build a hut and make fishing rods with palm-frond reeds. Once back on board, they write in their journals.

Later, as we sail away from these islands of living history, we whisper good-bye and good luck to a beautiful people. We hope their culture and islands will be preserved⁷ forever.

3. leaves

4. houses or homes

5. a type of banana

6. currency in Panama

7. **Preserve (verb):** to keep something in its original state

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Lee-Ottman and her family learned about the Kuna Indians' way of life by experiencing it for themselves.
 - B. Learning about the Kuna Indians' way of life encouraged Lee-Ottman and her family to change their lifestyle.
 - C. Lee-Ottman and her family learned from the Kuna Indians how important it is to be respectful of another's culture.
 - D. The Kuna Indians' culture is strongly impacted by the tourists who visit them, like Lee-Ottman and her family.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "the Kuna Indians, have made the area famous because of their efforts to protect their rainforests, their independence, and their culture." (Paragraph 9)
 - B. "We have heard that it is disrespectful to photograph a Kuna person without permission and we want to honor the customs of the Kuna people." (Paragraph 12)
 - C. "We walk around the village and look at the way the Kuna people live. Their homes have dirt floors, and reeds or canes form the sides." (Paragraph 14)
 - D. "we whisper good-bye and good luck to a beautiful people. We hope their culture and islands will be preserved forever." (Paragraph 17)

3. PART A: How do Lee-Ottman and her family approach the Kuna Indians' different culture?
 - A. They are somewhat fearful of the Kuna Indians' different traditions.
 - B. They are confused by the Kuna Indians' different practices.
 - C. They are interested and respectful of the Kuna Indians' culture.
 - D. They are unintentionally disrespectful of the Kuna Indians' culture.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Three men, far out at sea, are in a dugout canoe called a cayuco. We pull up near them." (Paragraph 6)
 - B. "And while visitors are welcome, non-Kuna people are not allowed to own land." (Paragraph 10)
 - C. "In Kuna, mola means 'clothing' or 'blouse' and is part of the Kuna women's traditional dress." (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "Then we ask if we can take a photo of her. We have heard that it is disrespectful to photograph a Kuna person without permission and we want to honor the customs of the Kuna people" (Paragraph 12)

5. Which of the following best describes the structure of the events in text?
- A. Lee-Ottman reflects on the events of the day after they happened by writing in her journal.
 - B. Lee-Ottman explains different parts of the Kuna culture one at a time and supports them with facts.
 - C. Lee-Ottman writes about the events of her day in the present and in the order in which they happened.
 - D. Lee-Ottman starts by explaining why her family is exploring the Kuna culture and then describes what they saw.

6. What is the Kuna Indians' relationship with non-Kuna people?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the text, Claudia Lee-Ottman reveals that the Kuna Indians don't allow non-Kuna people to purchase land. How do you think this is a means of preserving the Kuna Indian community? How else do communities preserve their traditions and culture around the world? Do you agree with the Kuna Indians? Why or why not?
2. Claudia Lee-Ottman states that her children are homeschooled. How do you think visiting the places and people that they learn about contributes to their education? If you had the chance, would you choose to be homeschooled on a boat traveling the world? Why or why not? How can real-world experiences help us learn?