HOW TO RUIN A PARADISE… AND TO SAVE ONE

Picture an idyllic beach on a tropical island. The water is an intensely pure cobalt blue, gentle waves softly foaming upon the sugar soft sand. People are picnicking under the coconut palm trees that line the beach, children are happily playing, it's 75 degrees and sunny, the azure sky dotted with puffy little clouds.

The beach is set in a small cove, and built along the rocks on one side of the cove are picturesque little homes of the local villagers, whose livelihood is fishing. A number of them are doing just that in their outrigger dugout canoes a few hundred yards offshore. With the clear sky, you know it's going to be a spectacular sunset. Then you'll have fresh fish for dinner, caught by one of those fellows in the outriggers.

Paradise, no doubt about it, you think. Then you notice those picturesque homes are all in a state of filth and decay, even though they are lived in. The beach is littered with tires and other refuse. Under the swaying palms are vast piles of garbage and trash.

In fact, everywhere you go on the island, along every road (which have more potholes than pavement), in every village and town, there's trash and litter. Not dumps of garbage, but the villages and roadsides *are* garbage dumps of plastic bags, foil wrappings, pieces of cardboard boxes, trash, trash, trash every place you look. The whole island, it seems, is one big garbage dump.

Welcome to the Comoros.

More precisely, the Union of the Comoros, a prime candidate for the world's most screwed-up country and object lesson for how to ruin paradise.

So settle in your favorite chair with a glass of your favorite beverage (with refills at the ready), and let me tell you a true mind-blow of a weird adventure story about a lost corner of the world you never heard of.

The Arab slavers called them *Guzar al-Qamar*, the Islands of the Moon, four small volcanic specks in the Indian Ocean just to the north of Madagascar. The French turned Qamar into Comoro. There's Grand Comoro, Mohéli, and Anjouan. We'll get to the fourth, Mayotte, a bit later.

Madagascar, we learned, was settled by Indonesians from Southeast Asia. The Comoros were settled by Black Africans, Bantus specifically, sailing in small canoes from the African east coast centuries ago. They were thoroughly Moslemized by Arab and Persian slavers and traders.

Europeans showed no interest in the Comoros until the French showed up in the 1840s, who progressively colonized them until they were formally annexed in 1908. The main exports became vanilla beans and ylang-ylang oil (pronounced ee-lang-ee-lang, from a flower and used for perfume).

They were mostly forgotten for over sixty years, until a local fellow in Grand Comoro, Ahmed Abdallah Abderemane, proclaimed himself Sultan and demanded independence for what he called the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros. He organized a "referendum" in Grand Comoro, Mohéli, and Anjouan (the folks in Mayotte told him to get lost), and declared the results meant freedom from France.

On September 5, 1975, Abderemane proclaimed the Comoros' independence. The French said okay. The Soviets saw their opportunity.

They had just succeeded in colonizing Mozambique earlier that year, with the Portuguese turning the place over to the Soviet-backed Communists of FRELIMO. Why not pick up a colonial side-dish nearby, particularly when they had a man in place trained and ready?

This was Ali Soilih, who had been educated in France where his Marxist professors put him in touch with the KGB. When independence came, the Soviets showed Soilih how to be Abderemane's Minister of Defense, the guy in charge of soldiers with guns. Thus Adberemane's government lasted little more than three months, until January 1976 when Soilih seized power and turned the Comoros into a Commie hell-hole.

Soilih organized a gang of thugs called *Jeunesse Revolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Youth) who roamed the islands beating up and robbing anyone they thought was "bourgeois" or who displeased them in any way.

It took two years for the French to figure out Soilih was Soviet Communist and never going to let them back in the Comoros. Enter the most legendary "merc" - mercenary soldier - of modern times, *Bob Denard*.

He was born in Bordeaux in 1929; his real name is Gilbert Bourgeaud (pronounced zhil-bear boor-zhow). He left the French Army in the 1950s after fighting in Indochina and Morocco, and went to work for the African branch of French Foreign Intelligence, the SDECE (External Documentation and Counter-Espionage Service), and its boss, the equally legendary *Jacques Foccart*.

Foccart was tasked by French President Charles de Gaulle with maintaining control over France's African colonies even as they were being given their "independence" in the 1960s.

Under the name of "Bob Denard," Bourgeaud became Foccart's go-to guy for coups and regime destabilizations in Benin, Congo, Cameroun, Guinea, Chad and numerous other places to ensure French primacy in Francophone Africa. From 1968 to 1978, Foccart placed him as the military advisor to the government of Gabon to make sure the SCECE's boy, Omar Bongo, stayed in power (Bongo still is, by the way.)

Finally Foccart decided it was time for Soilih to be history. On May 25, 1978, Denard and 43 fellow mercs landed on Galawa beach at the north end of Grand Comoro, sped down the west coast to the capital town of Moroni, took Soilih prisoner, and shot every Revolutionary Youth they could find.

Four days later, Soilih himself was shot "trying to escape." Abderemane was flown in and installed, with considerable French pomp and ritual, as president.

For the next 12 years, Denard ruled the Comoros as his private kingdom. He had his own harem of Comorian beauties, his private "presidential guard," a private compound and villa on the gorgeous beach at Galawa, and made a fortune in the vanilla and ylang-ylang trade. He lived every mercenary's dream.

It came to an end in 1989 when Abderemane finally tired of being his puppet. This led to a coup attempt which Denard claims he was not a part of and Abderamane's family claims he was. Either way, Abderemane was shot and killed in his office by a military officer, and a few days later, Denard was evacuated to South Africa by French paratroopers.

Soilih's half-brother, Said Mohammed Djohar, seized power, ruling not quite as brutally as Soilih but bad enough. After several failed coup attempts of their own, a group of Comorians paid

Denard to come back and get rid of him. But it was now 1995. Foccart had retired, the SCECE had been transformed into the DGSE (General Directorate of External Security), Denard himself was 66, and he was on his own.

Nonetheless, he gave it a try. With 33 mercs, he landed on tiny Itsandra Beach near Moroni, was joined by 300 armed Comorians, took the presidential palace and arrested Djohar. French President Francois Mitterand dispatched paramilitary operatives from the DGSE's SA (Service Action) force. Denard surrendered without a shot, Djohar was packed off to exile, a compliant local named Mohammed Taki Abdulkarim installed in his place, with Denard spending 10 months in a Paris jail cell until sprung by an aging Foccart.

Since then, over a dozen coups or coup attempts have been perpetrated by various Comorian military officers. Abdulkarim was poisoned in 1998. The place is currently ruled by a Colonel Azali Assoumani who needs continual bribes for everything.

The South Africans (Sun International Hotels) built a beautiful resort at Galawa, but the never-ending demands for bribes drove them out. There isn't a single good hotel now in the country. Nor a good restaurant, nor frankly, a good anything. Everything is shabby and filthy. Plus the omnipresent piles of garbage. The Comorians are experts at how to ruin a paradise.

The Comorians of Mayotte (Mahorais, as they call themselves), however, are experts at saving one. They voted (64% in 1974 and 99% in 1976) to remain a French Overseas Territory and not join Grand Comoro, Anjouan, and Mohéli in an independent Union of Comoros. Mahorais look upon their fellow Comorians on those other three islands as "foolish idiots." Pretty accurate description.

On Mayotte, everything works. There are nice hotels and restaurants, good roads, it's safe and peaceful - and it's clean. The beautiful beaches are spotless, every village has trash collection, there are no piles of rubbish. Plastic bags are against the law. So is littering.

The folks in Mayotte intend to keep it this way. There are less than 200,000 of them on their 144 square mile island and illegal immigrants are not welcome. People from Anjouan (250,000 on 424 sq. mi.) or Grand Comoro (350,000 on 443 sq. mi.) are always trying to sneak in via raft, sail, or leaky boat.

Mayotte lies in the center of a huge lagoon surrounded by coral reefs miles away from the island. Those reefs are Mayotte's security wall, for folks from Anjouan sail across at night, hit the reefs, and drown.

Over the past three decades, thousands upon thousands of Union Comorians have drowned on Mayotte's reefs. No one, not French patrol boats nor Mahorais in their fishing boats, come to their rescue.

"They must learn not to come here," a Mahorai explained to me, "for they are not wanted. They will not spoil Mayotte as they have their own islands."

That's why almost all Union Comorians who do manage to get to Mayotte are turned in to the police (*la gendarmerie*), who promptly deport them back to Anjouan, Grand Comoro, or Mohéli.

The Mahorais, the people of Mayotte, could really teach us a lot about how to handle illegal immigrants in America.

They could also teach Moslems world-wide how to practice Islam.

The Comoros, Mayotte included, are virtually 100% Moslem. Again, there's a difference. After Denard's last escapade in1995, the French said to hell with the Comoro Union and stuck to Mayotte, making the three Union islands largely dependent on handouts from Moslem countries like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

The price is an increasing Wahhabi and Khomeini-type interpretation of Islam. Burkas, never before worn by Comorian women, are becoming a common sight in Moroni. The Saudis bribed Col. Azali into letting an Islamist cleric from Moroni who had been educated in both Saudi and Iran, Ahmed Abdallah Sambi, be "elected" president last year. Sambi likes to be called "Ayatollah" by his followers.

The Mahorais want no part of this either. Theirs is a "relaxed" Islam. They laugh at burkas and ayatollahs, drink beer, have fun, are peaceful, tolerant, friendly, and suspiciously regard Middle East sheikhs trying to establish "Islamic charities" and build big mosques as Greeks bearing deadly gifts.

The Mayotte version of Islam is one with which the world could easily be at peace. If all Moslems were like the Mahorais, there would be no radical Islam.

How to save a paradise, how to deal with illegal aliens, how to have a peaceful and tolerant Islam. Three pretty good lessons to be learned here in a place you never heard of.

It's not easy getting to the Comoros. You'd only go to Moroni and the Union islands to witness a sad, macabre spectacle of a crazy people not having the will to rise out of their own filth.

But you'd go to Mayotte to swim with sea turtles, snorkel along fantastically beautiful coral outcrops in the lagoon, and simply enjoy a paradise preserved by a proud people. A paradise that looks like this:

At the upper end of this beach is where the mommy sea turtles come ashore at night to lay their eggs.

Jackson and I had a wonderful time here in Mayotte and would love to come back. But never ever again to the Garbage Islands of the Comoro Union.

Ps: Jacques Foccart died at age 83 in 1997. Bob Denard is now 78 and retired to his villa in Bordeaux, but sadly suffers from Alzheimer's.