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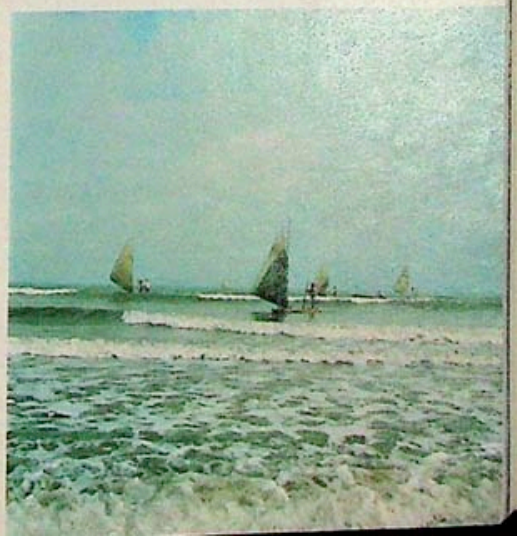
The Balsas of Playas

By ROLF BLOMBERG

THE COASTAL TOWN of Playas, Ecuador, on the northwestern side of the Gulf of Guayaquil is a popular seaside resort much frequented by tourists and vacationers. Originally, even long before the Spaniards came to the New World, it was a genuine fishing hamlet.

ALTHOUGH PREHISTORIC *in design, balsas are still used by a few fishermen at Playas, Ecuador and are a sight worth seeing at this popular seaside resort.*

All photographs by the author



Today, Playas still has a large fishing population but modern shrimp boats and outboard motorboats have, for the most part, replaced the primitive balsas that were used for centuries to bring in the catch. These small rafts are perhaps the sight most worth seeing at Playas and, when not in use, 60 to 70 of them can usually be seen on the beaches. They are, according to archaeologists, most probably similar to the rafts used by Indians during pre-Columbian times.

Simple in construction, the rafts are basically three balsa logs tied together with cords (no nails are used). The middle log carries the mast with its triangular sail and also has a slit through it for inserting a centerboard. Each balsa log costs about 400 Sucres ($16), and a complete craft has a value of 1,600 Sucres ($64). These rafts are very seaworthy; sometimes the waves and the surf turn them over, but they will never sink.

The balsas carry baskets, or corves, for holding the live bait caught with casting nets in shallow water along the beaches. The actual fishing is done with line, and the most sought-after take is corvina. The fishermen, two on a raft, set sail when the tide is going out. They put out to sea some 15 to 20 miles (24 to 32 kilometers) and then return with the incoming tide.

Changes with the Times

Formerly, there was good fishing close to the Playas shores, but not any longer. Since the onset of fishing in a more efficient way with modern tackle from power-driven boats, the balsa-raft fishermen are compelled to seek their catch a good distance seaward, on shoals that are too shallow for the larger boats.

Those balsa-raft fishermen who are successful can make up to 1,000 Sucres ($40) for a day's work, but there are also many days when they return with hardly any fish. In fact, a few of them do not fish any more; instead, they search out the shrimpers on the open seas and buy the unwanted fish that they catch in their shrimp nets. Then, they sell this fish at a small profit to buyers who come to Playas daily from Guayaquil.

Thus, with the changing times, the fishermen on the little, seaworthy balsas are also gradually changing their *modus operandi*.

SIMPLE AND SEAWORTHY, *the rafts are basically three small balsa logs tied together with cord. They also have a centerboard, mast, and sail.*





NOAA

HIGH GROUND IS THE SAFEST *place to be when a tsunami strikes. Coastal residents should evacuate low-lying areas and stay out of them until an all clear is issued by a competent authority such as the civil defense or the police department.*

Tsunami Warning Systems

By MICHAEL J. MOONEY

APRIL 1, 1946 proved to be one of the cruelest April Fool's Days in recent memory for thousands of coastal dwellers in and around the vast 63-million-square-mile (163-million-square-kilometer) Pacific basin. Deep in the Aleutian Trench off Alaska's Unimak Island, gigantic undersea earth tremors triggered a series of seismic sea waves, or tsunamis, that radiated out relentlessly over the Pacific. The first to feel the impact of these giant waves was the five-man Coast Guard [illegible] at Scotch Cap, which was [illegible] by a foaming 100-foot (30-meter) juggernaut at 2:18 in the morning *(see* "Tragedy at Scotch Cap," *Sea Frontiers,* Vol. 21, No. 2, March-April, 1975).

Less than five hours later, the first of four successive monster waves surged unexpectedly into Hilo harbor on the island of Hawaii. Shortly after 7 A.M., horrified eyes beheld the spectacle of towering waves up to 45 feet