

One (more) Spanish Woman in Holbox

An Artist's Residency Project Seeks to Explore the Complex Situation of Holbox Beyond the Island's Perimeter

Susana Martín Gijón



A view of downtown of Isla Holbox in the Mexican Caribbean

Most Spaniards who travel to Mexico do so in order to discover the idyllic beaches of Cancun and its surroundings armed with a piña colada and a hammock at a fine resort. They will eat one burrito or another, drink tequila with salt, take photos by the turquoise sea, avoid the hordes of tourists as they try to capture the perfect picture, the one that will attract the most “likes.” The white tan mark left by the “all included” bracelet will be proof of their great trip, exhibited with pride. That’s the desired destination of most of the four hundred thirty-two passengers flying on the same jet as me from Madrid, many of them students on their graduation trip carrying overstuffed travel bags.

Few of them venture so far as the island of Holbox, unknown to most people in my country. Those who make the trip are seeking a certain essence they will never find in one of those mega-tourist resorts. But, by faith, some arrive here. On the second day of my stay, strolling along the beach of Punta Cocos, I saw a girl reading a novel

by Carmen Mola. If ever there was a made-in-Spain crime thriller that transcended borders, it's *La novia gitana* (*The Gypsy Bride*), translated into more than twenty languages. But, my goodness, I said to myself, here in Holbox? Yes, here too. And in the original version. One of the few Spaniards had brought it with her. And she was reading it stretched out on a chaise lounge at her luxury hotel, happy as a clam.

Nonetheless, many of these travelers, whether Spanish, North American, or even from Mexico, will not go further than the confines of the beach other than to walk along the lively street, Tiburón Ballena, in search of live music, or to walk through the central park with its colorful Band Shell and to eat pizza with shrimp at the Edelyn Restaurant, as mandated by the tourist guides. They will leave without knowing that five minutes away all kinds of waste are accumulating among the mangroves, that the kid who prepared them a fresh coconut at the foot of their chaise lounge lives in a hut that floods every time it rains, that the Hawksbill Sea Turtles are no longer sighted and that before thrill seekers like themselves arrived in multitudes, the streets were not solid packed but were white sand glowing under the full moon. That the paradise they believe the island to be was just enjoyed by the Holbox islanders before we all arrived led by the hand of the capitalist system to take photographs for our social network profiles. They will leave enamored of Holbox, yes, but with that idealized blind love we employ without actually knowing the person we have right before us.

It is precisely this vision that Marta del Pozo and Iván Pérez-Blanco Aviléz would like to change by establishing the *Quantum Prose* artistic and literary residency project in order to expose the complex situation of Holbox beyond the perimeter of the island. While riding a bicycle without brakes, one has no choice but to confront the evidence: the shacks facing the mangroves (as well as cement structures being built from one day to the next), far from the hotels with hammocks lining the beach, dodging potholes and puddles. The shacks and garbage, the poverty and lack of sustainability of the mode of life we form part of even when we believe ourselves to be intrepid ecotourists because we have braved a two-hour voyage by van and resisted wearing our bracelets.

And here I am. Pedaling and sliding in the mud. Bumping into wagons carrying tourists (I still haven't learned to ride without brakes). Eating the plate of the day at the restaurant "Los Abuelos," listening to the children play mandolin as taught by old Don Víctor and watching the sunset over Isla de la Pasión and people practicing karate. Awakening in nature, surprised by iguanas passing next to me as I write these notes. Scratching madly at gnat bites and lathering my sunburnt shoulders with aloe

lotion. As well as getting drenched in the middle of the night in my bucolic wooden cabin because, listen: when the North wind lashes out, it rains without compassion. And I still haven't been caught in the middle of the Majaché tropical storm.

So, you find yourself in a few tight spots, moments of euphoria blend with others of pure desperation and, ultimately, you go through all the stages of a relationship until deciding that, yes, you love the island despite and precisely because of every single one of its contradictions and that, because of them, and because the island is so fragile and vulnerable, you would like to protect it in every way you can. You don't want to retain the idealized version of the island portrayed in Instagram photos. You want to establish a real and faithful commitment. And, even if you can't always remain at its side, you can at least hope that those who do will treat it in the best possible way. You hope that Holbox will continue to be a paradise for all the species that inhabit it, and not just for *consumerists intrepidus*. Because mature love, true love, demands commitment and generosity. Much generosity. And I am grateful to *Quantum Prose* for communicating this to us.

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Una española (más) en Holbox

Un proyecto de residencia artística
busca dar a conocer la realidad
compleja de Holbox fuera del perímetro
de la isla



Una vista de la isla de Holbox, en el Caribe mexicano.
ZSTOCKPHOTOS (GETTY)