

## Sun Myung Moon's Lost Eco-Utopia

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Photo: Riccardo Vecchio

A decade before his death, Sun Myung Moon—multimillionaire founder of the controversial Unification Church—sent a band of followers deep into the wilds of Paraguay, with orders to build the ultimate utopian community and eco-resort. So how's that working out? Monte Reel machetes his way toward heaven on Earth.

Day three aboard this muggy cargo boat and I'm still incapable of turning around without bumping into a hanging bag of oranges, or a sack of wheat flour, or a jug of cooking oil. Crammed to the rafters with rapidly perishing produce, the *Aquidaban* is as colorful and claustrophobic as an Arabian souk. An unwritten rule confines pigs, chickens, and goats to the foredeck, but two plus-size rats, Carlos and Pepe, as named by the cook who ladles out the stew, have the run of the ship. The rawboned cats prowling around are wise not to pick fights.

For roughly six dollars a day, anyone can hitch a ride aboard this floating market, a 128-footer that runs a weekly route on the Paraguay River from the center of the country to its northern border. Dozens of locals have wedged themselves into the second deck. They include women and children, but most are bushwhackers: men who scrape out a living clearing trees and brush for small-scale livestock farmers along the upper stretches of the river. Some travel with their own chainsaws. Others carry machetes wrapped in newspaper. They huddle shoulder to shoulder, dulling their discomfort with cans of Ouro Fino, Paraguay's cheapest beer. Most speak the indigenous language of Guarani first, Spanish second.

I'm with Toni Greaves, an Australian photographer. With my notebooks, her cameras, and our English, we're conspicuous outsiders. Occasionally, I catch the men staring at us and speaking in lowered voices, as if taking bets on what exactly we're up to. They'll never guess. We're looking for paradise. I've heard it's under construction just upriver.

According to my GPS, we've crept into the southern edge of the Pantanal, a tropical wetland that's about 30 times larger than Everglades National Park. The clear divide between the river and its banks has begun to dissolve. Floating islands of rubbery-stemmed water hyacinths grow big enough to be mistaken for solid land. Water encircles the trunks of riverside wax palms, and dark stains mark how much higher on the trees it can rise. The red-dirt roads in this part of the country are washed out for months at a time, and when temperatures as hot as 120 degrees bake them dry, they become dangerously rutted. This boat is the only reliable mode of transport serving the riverside villages.

A couple of times a day, we stop at a predetermined location, which can be as simple as a single shack

with nothing else in sight but water and scrubland. A crewman shoves a long wooden gangplank out to the bank. Mattresses, motorcycles, chocolate cookies, oxcart wheels—there’s no predicting what might pass over those splintered boards to the families pacing with anticipation at the river’s edge.

One of the Guarani-speaking bushwhackers standing next to me on the foredeck can’t contain his curiosity. “Which stop are you getting off at?” he asks in rusty Spanish. Five or six of his friends—all, like him, in their twenties, with baseball caps pulled low over their brows—stop chatting and pretend not to eavesdrop. “Puerto Leda,” I answer.

He tilts back a can of Ouro Fino. I ask him if he’s heard of it. Of course, he says. He rides this boat once a month, and it always stops at Puerto Leda. But, like everyone else I’ve quizzed on board, he’s never walked ashore to look around.

“I know that some Japanese men live there,” he tells me. “They’re with the Moon sect.” He drains the can, eyeing me. “Are you?”

“No,” I say. An orange sun abruptly sinks under the tree line on the river’s west bank, and within 15 minutes an orange moon pops up over the opposite horizon, paling as it rises. I duck inside the pilothouse. The captain predicts we’ll reach Puerto Leda in the dark hours of early morning.

THE REVEREND SUN MYUNG Moon, who died in September 2012 at age 92, about a year after my trip to Puerto Leda, founded the Unification Church in South Korea in 1954. In addition to overseeing the church, which he said aimed to fulfill Jesus’ unfinished mission by establishing a new “kingdom of heaven on Earth,” Moon managed vast commercial interests and called himself a messiah. He was frequently accused of cult practices, in part because some of his hundreds of thousands of followers turned over very personal decisions—including the choice of marriage partner—to him. More than a decade ago, Moon told some members of his church that he wanted them to lay the foundation for a new Garden of Eden in one of the least hospitable landscapes on the planet—northern Paraguay.

Moon was notorious for attention-grabbing gestures: conducting mass weddings in Madison Square Garden, taking out full-page ads in major American newspapers to support Richard Nixon during Watergate, spending 13 months in federal prison for tax fraud and conspiracy in the early '80s. But during the final years of his life, his Eden-building project kept chugging along well out of the public eye, germinating largely unseen in this remote wilderness of mud.

In 2000, Moon paid an undisclosed amount for roughly 1.5 million acres of land fronting the Paraguay River. Most of that property was in a town called Puerto Casado, about 100 miles downriver from Puerto Leda. Moon’s subsidiaries wanted the land to open commercial enterprises ranging from logging to fish farming. But a group of Puerto Casado residents launched a bitter legal battle to nullify the deal. While that controversy continued to divide Paraguayans, the Puerto Leda project proceeded under the radar. Moon turned the land over to 14 Japanese men—“national messiahs,” according to church documents, who were instructed to build an “ideal city” where people could live in harmony with nature, as God intended it. Moon declared that the territory represented “the least developed place on earth, and, hence, closest to original creation.”

Moon wasn’t the first utopian to favor Paraguay. Examine many European maps drawn between 1600 and 1775 and you’ll find something labeled Lago Xarayes at the head of the Paraguay River. Conquistadores journeying up the river confronted the inundated plains and confused them for a massive inland sea. Tribes spoke about a Land Without Evil on the far side of Xarayes, and the Spaniards believed that the same area hid a gateway to El Dorado, the lost city of gold. By the 1800s, most mapmakers correctly recognized the Xarayes as a mirage and relabeled it as part of the Pantanal.

Still, the dream lived on for some. In 1886, a German anti-Semite named Bernhard Förster and his wife, Elisabeth Nietzsche—Frederich’s sister—founded Nueva Germania, a colony located about 115 miles southeast of Concepción that was designed to spawn generations of Aryan Übermensch. After three years of feverish struggle in the jungle heat, Förster mixed himself a cocktail of morphine and strychnine, drank deeply, died, and left the place in a state of irreversible decline. The next century brought utopian colonies of Australian socialists, Finnish vegetarians, English pacifists, and German Nazis. They all failed.

So how are Moon’s followers—or Moonies, as they don’t like to be called—holding up? Hard to say. I’m aware of two other journalists who’ve seen Puerto Leda. One, a British Catholic missionary, visited after the first colonists arrived and was unable to fathom their motives. Maybe they were smuggling drugs, she insinuated in a church magazine. The other, a Paraguayan newspaper reporter, visited in 2008 and published a few articles praising the Unification Church’s philanthropic work, which includes building schools in rural areas. The reporter championed the ecotourism potential around Puerto Leda but included no details about the people living there.

A few weeks before my trip, I got in touch with a Unification Church office in Asunción. The initial

response was warm: I'd be welcome to visit, a representative said. But by the time I arrived in the capital, things had gotten complicated.

For much of the past decade, Moon's surviving children (he fathered 15 from two marriages) have been fighting for control of the empire. The bickering has extended to Paraguay, where the Unification Church has established several corporations or foundations that oversee agribusiness interests. In 2010, Moon's eldest living son from his second marriage, Hyun Jin Moon, organized a Global Peace Festival in Asunción, but the Unification Church's regional director refused to recognize the event. He claimed that Hyun Jin Moon had fallen out of favor with his father. Moon's eldest daughter, Ye Jin, later backed the director. Now the church's various offices in Paraguay were pledging allegiance to different sides.

Just days before Greaves and I arrived in Asunción, one of Moon's local subsidiaries announced that it planned to sue the office I had contacted. My calls and messages went unanswered. By the time I boarded the *Aquidaban*, I'd begun to suspect that the National Messiahs in Puerto Leda might have no clue we were coming.

Around 5 a.m., the boat begins to veer to port. We inch along the west bank, and I see nothing resembling the gates of Eden. It's dark. My mind drifts to the British missionary's 2000 account of Puerto Leda, which described her arriving "in the blackness of night on the crocodile-ridden bank," where she was accosted by an attack dog "with a jawful of long white teeth."

"Think positive thoughts," Greaves tells me.

Greaves believes that positive conceptualization makes good things happen. During our first two days on the boat, we kept joking about the "friendly little lizard" that ate her bananas and scattered droppings all over the crime scene. There are no lizards on this boat, just Carlos and Pepe.

I succumb to negative thinking. My imagination fills the darkness with visions: the curled lip of a snarling dog, the slow, patient blink of a crocodile's eyelid.

NO CROCODILES, NO DOGS. Just one man, a portly Paraguayan navy guard in military fatigues, awaits us at the end of the gangplank. He smiles without joy. "This isn't where you want to get off," he says.

"This is Puerto Leda, and the people here are expecting us," I say. I drop some names: the man I had been leaving messages with in Asunción, his secretary. The guard has never heard of them. But the fact that we know where the hell we are seems good enough for him. He abandons the role of brick wall and welcomes us into this humid kingdom. Beyond the small wooden cabin where he sleeps, I see a string of lights farther inland—the heart of Puerto Leda.

"Do you have repellent?" he asks.

My skin is lacquered in a stiff coat of stale sweat and deet. "Lots."

"Good," he says. "You'll see at night. We can't even talk to each other because of the mosquitoes that fly into our mouths."

Another man has arrived in a truck to siphon fuel from a tank on the *Aquidaban*. He introduces himself as Wilson, a site administrator. He's not a National Messiah but rather a 44-year-old Chilean with a youthful, friendly face, a polo shirt, and rubber boots, a Moon follower who moved here two years ago. His wife and children are still in Chile.

"I didn't know anyone was supposed to be coming," he says. Walking to his truck, he fishes out a phone and executes a minor miracle: he pulls a signal from the air and places a call, trying to figure out if anyone in the colony knows anything about our visit. He comes up empty but still helps us with our bags, tossing them in the back of his truck.

"Let's go," he says.

The *Aquidaban* drifts away, and we bounce along a dirt road, leaving the guard behind at his cabin. "It's a naval station," Wilson explains, a gift from the Messiahs to the Paraguayan government. In exchange for a permanent security presence, he says, the navy now has a base to patrol the upper stretches of the river.

Within a minute, the headlights reveal an indistinct cluster of buildings. I can make out what appear to be several two-story houses, a water tower, a couple of large communal buildings, and a cell-phone tower.

Wilson kills the engine in front of a structure that looks nothing like the humble river-side casitas found throughout this region, a district the size of South Carolina in which about 80 percent of the 11,000

residents lack running water. The building in front of us has a peaked terra-cotta roof, brick-and-stucco walls, expansive glass windows, and no fewer than five remote-controlled Carrier air-conditioning units. At the front door, a dozen pairs of leather slippers wait for us. “Very Japanese,” Greaves observes. We remove our dirty shoes and take our first steps into Reverend Moon’s Victorious Holy Place.

All is silent. Wilson flips a switch, throwing light on what appears to be a dining hall. The large wooden tables, each covered with a plastic tablecloth, could accommodate about 100 people. They are vacant.

“There aren’t many people around right now,” Wilson explains. “But sometimes we have 100 working here at once.”

I spot just one, a Paraguayan cook who emerges from a kitchen. With disconcerting efficiency, a buffet breakfast materializes on a table: fresh coffee, tea, miso soup, fried eggs, cereal, cheese, ham, fruit, bread, and marmalade.

“Wow,” I say, the word bubbling up from some primitive part of my brain as I attempt to take in everything at once: the kingly buffet, the decorative carvings on the high-back chairs, the FISH OF THE PANTANAL poster, the Ping-Pong table in a far corner, the neatly stacked Spanish-language copies of Reverend Moon’s autobiography, *As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen*, near the wall. An ascetically thin Japanese man in a polo shirt and jeans walks toward us, smiling behind wire-rimmed glasses.

“Good morning,” he says in English.

He pads across the glazed tiles with a hurried shuffle, as if he’s been waiting for us for years. He’s 62, and his name is Katsumi Date (pronounced *dah-tay*), or just Mister Date, as Wilson addresses him. He’s a National Messiah.

“Please enjoy your breakfast,” he tells us. “Would you like a hot shower?”

Actually, we would. On the *Aquidaban*, a rubber hose dangling into a stricken toilet doubled as a handheld showerhead. Here we’ll discover that individually wrapped soaps and shampoos are freely available in the tiled showers, as are clean towels. Indulging our physical comfort appears to be Mister Date’s only priority. He’s already made beds for us, he says, in case we need a nap after such a long journey. He apologizes repeatedly for not being better prepared. “We weren’t expecting visitors,” he reiterates.

“So,” he asks, “what is it you would like to see?”

Well, we’d like to see what 12 years of dedicated labor in pursuit of earthly perfection looks like. The *Aquidaban* is scheduled to hit the end of its weeklong route this afternoon, turn around, and stop here again sometime in the evening. We’ve got 15 hours, maximum, to find out. “Everything,” I answer.

The place, Mister Date says, is all ours.

A FEW HUNDRED YARDS from the guard station, I spot a sportfishing boat docked at the riverside. It’s big—about 30 feet long, fiberglass, with a prominent cockpit. I ask Mister Date about it.

“Ah yes,” he says. “Reverend Moon designed that boat himself. It was brought here from New Jersey.”

Does the Reverend fish? I ask.

“Oh yes,” says Mister Date. “He is a world-champion tuna fisherman.”

The statement, technically speaking, is not false. In 1980, in Gloucester, Massachusetts, Moon’s boat was declared the winner of an international tuna-fishing tournament organized by the Unification Church. “I don’t want to be second even in catching tuna,” he said in a speech delivered a few months after the competition. “In every field and competition, I have been second to none.”

Apparently, the True Father’s fishing jones was a deciding factor in the placement of Puerto Leda. Moon first visited the Paraguay River on fishing trips in the 1990s, and by decade’s end he was cruising down it and ordering church members to wade along the muddy banks to plant 63 signposts demarcating the land he had decided to buy.

In 1999, Moon called his most devoted Japanese followers to join him on a 40-day spiritual retreat outside Fuerte Olimpo, about 25 miles south of Puerto Leda. I’d read a brief description of those days on a church website. One Messiah had written: “It was very hot and we wanted to bathe in the water. But we could not because piranhas would come. It’s a big problem! Also there are problems with ants. One National Messiah became very sick from an ant bite. It’s a dangerous place. There are all these problems,

but Father just says, ‘Ah, the purity of nature!’”

Clarity was never the True Father’s specialty. Even Moon’s followers had trouble understanding him at times. In addition to calling for a return to Original Creation here, he told his devotees, in 2000, that “we need to build the best underwater palace in the world.” In 2011, he declared, “It is time to establish God’s throne at the top of the Grand Canyon.” Once, he held up his fourth finger and told some followers, “I was ready for today’s meeting before 1 a.m. Today is the seventh day of the tenth month. Today is the seventh day but there isn’t an eighth day. Who decided that? It was me, but I am in a position where I can’t do what I decided, because 10 fingers are related.”

A Moon website that publishes the English transcripts of his speeches warns that they’re based on notes and “may bear no similarity to what was originally said in Korean.” Deciphering Moonspeak is even more daunting when your task is building a new Eden. Back in 1999, when Moon called on the Messiahs to assemble in Paraguay for the 40-day retreat, he spent most of that time fishing. Near the end of their time together, he instructed them to build an ecologically sustainable city that could serve as a model for the whole world. The plan, such as it was, lacked specifics; not all of the founders agreed on what the city should look like. Yet they forged ahead, determined to create something extraordinary in a place where wilderness reigned.

Now, as I glance at the scene, I see huge dormitory buildings, guesthouses, and sheds for mechanical repairs. I count seven freshwater fish farms, fully stocked with pacu, a toothy species that looks like an overgrown piranha. I see no other people.

“Normally, there are about 10 of us who live here,” Mister Date tells me. “But this week six are away in Asunción. So there are just four now.”

WE WALK THROUGH EARLY-morning light on smooth sidewalks, past manicured gardens of hibiscus and bougainvillea, beside an Olympic-size swimming pool. A young man hired from a nearby village slowly sweeps a filtering net through the deep end. Nothing—not a single foreign particle—seems to mar the clean blue rectangle of water. We enter a two-story communal building that resembles an office complex. I see Wilson in a small room, tapping away at a computer. We climb a stone staircase to the second floor, following Mister Date into what appears to be a rec room. There’s a television hooked up to a satellite system, and Mister Date pops a disc into a DVD player. The DVD, Mister Date tells us, explains everything.

The footage that flashes across the screen dates from 1999. We see the founding Messiahs walk across untamed wastes—the grounds where we now sit. They lay bricks in wet mud. They sand metal frames. They wash dishes in the river. They wear heavy clothing, light fires to keep the mosquitoes away, and sweat in the wavy heat. They stagger through gale-force winds.

Then, in a clip from 2000, we see Moon himself, touring the partially cleared grounds, wiping sweat from his brow, eating lunch, leaving in a private plane. The footage segues into scenes of the men working feverishly to build a luxury house for Moon and his wife, Hak Ja Han, who visited for a second and final time in late 2001. The rest of the DVD covers more recent developments, and the highlights—set to swelling orchestral music—unfold like a training montage from *Rocky*. Messiahs erect the water tower. Man-made fishponds materialize on the grounds. A landing strip is planed flat by tractors. The Messiahs unload saplings from the *Aquidaban*, then plant them in sprawling groves. A group of about a dozen visiting Japanese students—the children of Unification Church members—help the Messiahs build a school in a nearby village. When the DVD ends and the lights come up, I’m exhausted just from watching all that drudgery. I look at Mister Date’s corded forearms, his gaunt face, his waspy waist. Every aspect of his being seems molded by toil. Even with the help of the local hires, the Messiahs labor all day, usually outside.

“It’s a lot of work just to maintain,” he admits.

The fact that only 10 men live here comes rushing back to me. The colony has actually lost population since its inception, despite all the construction. Four of the original Messiahs have returned to Japan. Only the hardest of the hardcore have stuck it out.

And this raises a couple of questions: Who are these guys? And why have they put themselves through this?

MISTER AUKI WALKS ACROSS the dining hall carrying a basket filled with whole fish freshly yanked from the river. He’s a short, balding Messiah whose task this morning, as on most days, is to catch something for the grill.

“I caught lots of piranha today,” he tells the men, his face splitting into a smile. “And also a five-kilogram pacu.”

The pacu is now part of the lunch buffet, which the four Messiahs plus Wilson, Greaves, and I spoon onto plates. It's noon, the midpoint in an unchanging daily regimen: up at 4:30 a.m. for a half-hour of silent worship, breakfast at five, then back to their bedrooms to prepare for work at 6:30. Each is assigned a separate job: one fishes, another tills crops, another feeds the fish in the ponds. Someone tinkers with the water-purification system and checks the pH level in the pool, though no one swims. ("We don't take much time for recreation," one Messiah tells me.) They generally work in 1.5-hour bursts, taking half-hour breaks in between. Lunch always runs from noon to 1:30. They'll work until 5 p.m. and round out the evening with dinner and a short prayer meeting. That leaves them about two hours until the lights go out at nine. Most use that time to read, pray, or watch satellite TV.

Greaves and I tuck into our food and strike up a conversation with Norio Owada, whom I recognize from the DVD. Mister Owada is 64, and manual labor and a good diet of homegrown vegetables have pared him down to a taut, leathery minimum.

"Nice to meet you," he says, bowing his head quickly. He speaks English well enough to feel self-conscious when it's not quite right. Before he joined Moon in Fuerte Olimpo for the retreat, he worked as an English translator in greater Tokyo. He disliked the work and wanted out. Urban life felt meaningless.

"I needed a special challenge, and I couldn't find one in Japan," he tells me. "I had lost my motivation. When I came here I recovered it."

Mister Owada is a good example of your average founding Messiah: a city dweller with very little experience in construction and even less in wilderness survival. His wife was selected for him by Moon, who was said to possess the ability to intuit good matches, and Owada left her in Japan with their children when he came here. He gets a church salary, which helps keep the colony solvent. His family and other members of the Japanese congregation provide more money, though no one can tell me how much has been poured into the place. Once every 11 months, Mister Owada gets four weeks of vacation, which he can use to go to Japan. His wife has visited him twice since 1999.

In the beginning, the colonists hoped they would be joined by their wives (as well as many, many more followers). Every August, they invite children of Japanese church members to visit for a couple of weeks, but so far none have chosen to stay on. "My wife thinks that it is not realistic for her to move here yet," Mister Owada says, "because we still have to raise the standard of living more." When I press him on how tough and lonely this must get, Mister Owada says it doesn't bother him. Moon sanctified his personal sacrifices, promising the men that spiritual rewards would make up for their suffering. "Even if you die, what regret will you leave behind?" Moon asked the founders in 1999.

"We're risking our lives for this cause," Mister Owada says, his left eye twitching convulsively. "I like to risk my life," he continues. "That is doing something worthwhile. We have continued to stick with this."

Months later, after Moon's death from complications from pneumonia, I will once again reach out to Mister Date to see if the True Father's passing affects the Messiahs' dedication. It doesn't. They have the blessing of his widow, Mister Date says, and the ongoing feuds among the Moon children won't affect them. They plan to work on Puerto Leda for at least another decade.

"OF COURSE THERE IS ecotourism potential here," says Mister Date. We're standing outside an unfinished three-story brick building near a shed that protects three car-size generators. Mister Date refers to the brick building as "the hotel," but for the moment its only occupant is a stick-legged baby goat nosing around the food pellets being stored on the ground floor. Mister Date begins running down the potential pluses of opening the place up to travelers: tourism would allow people to see examples of sustainable living and take the lessons home with them. This Eden is intended to be an environmental paradise, he says. He tells me the Messiahs are also considering building an insect museum.

"Why did you stop work on the hotel?" I ask.

He pauses and smiles politely. "In a small place, you can have disagreements easily," he says. "They're expecting us to be financially independent, but that's not easy here." The Messiahs, it seems, don't always see eye-to-eye on the best way to reduce their dependence on member donations. Some want to concentrate on agribusiness and scrap the ecotourism idea. The hotel is unfinished because they aren't sure whether opening the place to outsiders is a good idea.

We walk on, past planted fields of lemongrass, oranges, mangoes, grapefruit, asparagus, sugarcane. The crops are struggling. If agriculture alone is expected to support the colony, there are some kinks to work out. The men have planted thousands of jatropa trees, which can be used to make biodiesel fuel, but hundreds of parrots zeroed in on them and ate all the fruit. During the most recent wet season, rising waters flooded many of the thousands of neem trees.

“It’s been a hard year,” Mister Date admits. “A lot of things have died because they were three months underwater.”

It’s clear that these guys have faith in miracles, and that’s exactly what’s needed here in Puerto Leda. Without one, the Victorious Holy Place seems destined to be another curious monument to human ambition and folly. But watching how hard the Messiahs work, I can’t help but admire their tenacity. The fanaticism that underlies their devotion to this cause must burn hot, but they hide it well. They’re not evangelical. They’re friendly and welcoming to those who don’t share their beliefs. They’re reflexively humble and generous and—whatever I might think of their motives—admirably tough. They’re underdogs. The kind of guys you root for.

During the last hours of my visit, Mister Date shows me something that might actually work out. “Japanese yams,” he announces, staring down at a plot of tilled soil. “They grow very large underground, up to 10 kilograms. They do well here.”

My immediate impulse is to celebrate this victory with hearty congratulations. I’m thrilled for his indefatigable yams. Maybe all the sweat that Mister Date has sunk into this plot will bear a little fruit. Maybe little victories like this can help other people in the Pantanal live richer lives. Maybe that’s enough.

Mister Date stares down at the dirt. “Unfortunately,” he says, “they taste very bad.”

AT THE END OF the day, I’m alone in the dining hall. We have a couple of hours before the *Aquidaban* is due to arrive and take us back downriver. In the kitchen, a cook is slicing piranha into sashimi strips. I’m standing at the Ping-Pong table, absently bouncing a ball up and down. The hollow *plock* echoes around the high rafters. No one wanders in for a game, so I head out toward the pool.

He’s still there, the man with the net, sweeping as if he hasn’t let up since dawn. A shame: I didn’t bring any trunks. But I do have a pair of heavy cotton cargo shorts in my backpack. I walk to the dormitory and return wearing them. I ask the sweeper, “Does anyone ever use this pool?”

“Only the tourists,” he says.

The tourists? Based on a guest book I flipped through earlier, he must be referring to those Japanese students who visit every August, the occasional Paraguayan government official, and Greaves and me.

I resist the urge to plunge, mainly because it’s so quiet around here, and step down the foam-padded ladder. Floating on my back toward the deep end, struggling against the weight of my shorts, I look to the west and see a pink disc of sun teed atop the crown of a palm tree. A gentle wind rustles the fronds, stirring nesting parakeets. They erupt in flight. Above them, against a backdrop of high cirrus, I spot what I think is a hawk climbing out of view.

I wonder: from those elevations, do the straight lines and Windex blue waters of this pool appear to be jarring aberrations? Or do these man-made forms resemble natural elements of the landscape, considering that chasing impossible fantasies is something humans always seem to do around here? Could this colony appear, from such lofty heights, to be as organic and as transient as a parakeet’s nest?

I have no idea. All I know for sure is that the sun is starting to slide behind the palm tree. Darkness will fall within minutes, and the mosquitoes will follow. Right now this water feels perfect.