

# LIVING LA VIDA ROQUES

DO YOU DREAM OF ESCAPING YOUR CUBICAL FOR A KITING SHANGRI-LA WHERE SESSIONS NEVER STOP? MEET ELIAS PERNALES AND LIESELOTTE VIEWEG — THEY FLED CONVENTIONAL JOBS FOR LOS ROQUES TO LIVE EVERY KITER'S FANTASY.

BY MICHAEL BEHAR ◦ PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER NESBITT





Elias Pernaes unfurls a map on his living room floor. “This is where we’ll launch our kites for the downwinder,” he says, pointing to a landless splotch of blue. I crouch next to him for closer scrutiny. We’re looking at a map of Los Roques, a Caribbean atoll that’s part of Venezuela. I arrived here four days ago. “There’s nothing there but open sea,” I inform him. “How do you expect us to rig?”

“THE MAP IS WRONG,” Pernaes scoffs. “Don’t worry. We’ll find an island. Everything will be fine.”

Pernaes, who lives here, is certain of his geography. I have to trust him. We chartered a skiff early in the morning to do a 16-mile downwinder along a barrier reef where, according to Pernaes, we’ll find the best riding in the islands. The skiff is too small to attempt a boat launch, so a smidgen of land would be useful.

Los Roques is 350 mangrove islets, sandbars and cays populating a swath of the Caribbean roughly 80 miles north of Caracas, Venezuela. Virtually all of the islands in this national park are uninhabited, except for Gran Roque (grand rock), where 1,200 barefoot residents cluster into a village about the size of a Costco. The streets are paved with fluffy sand, the nights are refreshingly cool and for six months of the year (January to June) robust trade winds rake this low-lying archipelago that annually sees only a handful of kiteboarders. There is flat water and surf, and there are endless empty miles of aquamarine pools where you can downwind for hours in waist-deep shallows so unfathomably clear and smooth it’s like riding on a pane of glass.

I’m here for eight days with my wife, Ashley, and photographer Alexander Nesbitt to kite with Pernaes and his 42-year-old girlfriend, Lieselotte Vieweg. The couple teaches kiteboarding for Dare2Fly, the kiting arm of Vela Windsurf Resorts. Pernaes, 44, is sun-bronzed, cinematically handsome and ripped like a triathlete. His eyes are luminous, his smile eternal. He’s infectiously easygoing. Vieweg, too, is in a state of perpetual bliss. And she’s extraordinarily fit as well, a lean and limber goddess of hewn muscle and sandy blond locks.

They live in a clapboard pine bungalow they built themselves on Francisquí, a mile-long mangrove-thatched islet where they are the lone residents. Their two-room cottage is made of pine planks and oiled with diesel fuel, which protects the timber from the corrosive salt air. There is no plumbing or fresh water. A perimeter fence made of 64 discarded windsurfing boards pitched on end surrounds the encampment like a medieval wall. “It’s the board cemetery,”

jokes Pernaes. Their front yard is an expansive flat-water lagoon; their backyard is a perfect side-off right break. A day for Pernaes and Vieweg begins with a wave session, and then, with kites aloft, they’ll amble across narrow Francisquí to ride the lagoon — all before breakfast.

Below: Elias Pernaes and Lieselotte Vieweg commuting, island-style. Bottom: Home sweet home.



Clockwise from far left: Isla Larga, Los Roques archipelago. Vieweg checks the wind from her porch. Pernaes rides his very own backyard break.







And, sure enough, Pernaless is right. There's a mite of land where, on paper, none should exist. It's the quintessential castaway cay, a circular flyspeck of shimmering white sand less than 50 yards wide.



Clockwise from top left: Napping required. Weekly rations. Bonding time for Vieweg and Pernaless. Pernaless shares his dreamy island with the crew.

Their world — an escapist fantasy of indulgence and tranquility — is precisely what lured me here. Since my entrée into kiting, I've had a recurring dream: Sell the farm and flee to a far-flung island to live as a kite bum. Admittedly, I've got a good gig penning tales of adventure. Ashley is a lawyer, a profession she enjoys amidst bouts of bipolar freneticism. Ultimately, though, we're still cogs in "The Machine." But when we heard about two nine-to-fivers (Pernaless toiled at an ad agency; Vieweg was a restaurateur) who'd ditched their big-city jobs to devote their entire existence solely to kiting, we were at once inspired and curious. Maybe my dream wasn't so far-fetched? To find out, we decided we had to meet them in person. A pilgrimage ensued.



"Getting food is difficult," Vieweg tells me when I ask her what's the hardest thing about living on Francisquí. "Whenever the supply ship comes to Gran Roque, you have to get there right away before everything is gone," says Pernaless.

"We also have to get all our fresh water from the desalination plant in town, so we only have a little bucket to bathe with." Vieweg, who is swinging in a hammock strung across their open-air living room, nods in agreement. "That is one of the worst things," she says.

Vieweg and Pernaless met in 2001. Vieweg had come to Los Roques on vacation. She was living in Merida, an Andean mountain town of 200,000 that's the country's adventure-sports capital. Vieweg owned a restaurant in Merida. She bought it shortly after returning to Venezuela from London, where she'd spent seven years working for a catering company. "When I got back from London, I'd had enough of all the rushing around," she says. "Life there is just completely different." She came to Los Roques intending to stay a week, but she found a job at a *posada* in Gran Roque and never left. Pernaless happened to be working for the same *posada* and it didn't take long before sparks began to fly. "I don't know what happened," Vieweg says, giggling like a schoolgirl recounting her first love. "We started to work together and we just stayed a couple ever since."

They took up windsurfing and began teaching for Vela. But by 2003, they'd grown weary of the daily boat commute between Gran Roque and Francisquí, where Vela had its school. A caretaker was living on Francisquí in a ramshackle lean-to. "When he decided to leave, we decided to move," recalls Vieweg. They wrangled the necessary park permits to expand the hut into living quarters, ordered supplies from Caracas — lumber, nails, tools, concrete — and invited 10 friends to help with construction. The couple set up a makeshift tent camp on the island. Not long afterward, a 60-foot cargo ship arrived with supplies. "It was truly amazing to see this huge ship unloading all our wood onto the sand," says Vieweg. "For the next 15 days, we worked with our friends from 7 in the morning until 7 in the evening until our house was finished."



With their digs complete, Vieweg and Pernaless turned to their next goal: learning to kiteboard. That didn't take long. After all, some of the best riding on the planet is 20



Pernaless navigates the shallow coral-specked slick, hands-free.

steps from their back door — they can, quite literally, roll out of bed and onto the beach for a session. They regularly venture farther afield, too, piling gear into their inflatable dinghy and motoring to nearby cays to scout for new spots along the archipelago's periphery, where, even today, vast tracts of beckoning flat water and myriad surf breaks have yet to see a single kiter.

The downwinder Pernaless suggests is one of these places — off the grid, uncharted, nameless. But the fact that my Google Earth snapshot shows open sea where Pernaless intends to commence our downwinder is a little worrisome. To get there, we blast upwind in an 18-foot fiberglass skiff with a 200-horsepower outboard clamped onto its stern. Our boat is named *Caracol* (seashell), and after 45 minutes its captain, Israel Alfonzo, kills the engine and we coast silently into a cerulean swimming pool with a sandy bottom. The water is translucent and brilliantly lit — beholding it without sunglasses is retina-searing.

And, sure enough, Pernaless is right. There's a mite of land where, on paper, none should exist. It's the quintessential

castaway cay, a circular flyspeck of shimmering white sand less than 50 yards wide. The island is a parody of itself, a caricature Gary Larson might sketch for a *Far Side* cartoon. I'm awestruck: This is the secret spot of the century (and I'm not telling). An intoxicating, 15-knot wind blows across a flat-water rink only gods and devils should know about. I'm certain we're breaking some kind of metaphysical law just being here.

We tumble out of the boat into 80-degree water, our kites scrunched under our arms, and wade onto the tiny spit to rig up. It's not nuking, but because we're in the center of a silky slick — a cup of chai has bigger chop — it hardly matters. Within minutes, people are ripping and whooping and nailing moves they'd never before landed. Pernaless, in particular, is boosting huge air over *Caracol* while Nesbitt's shutter clicks through frames like an Uzi. I ride upwind to practice back rolls and raleys. At one point, I spook a ray burrowed in the sand taking a snooze. It materializes inches below my board, and with a single pulse of its wings, propels itself into a speedy glide to safety.



**YOUR TRIP:**

So you want to kite in Los Roques? Here is a tip sheet to make your travels (relatively) hassle-free.

**INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS:** Unless you live in Florida, you're going to have to spend the night in either Caracas, Venezuela, or Miami. Opt for the latter. Caracas is a traffic-snarled cesspool of crime. A layover in Miami means you can catch an early-morning flight to Caracas (American Airlines has a daily nonstop at 7:20 a.m.). The three-hour flight gets you into Caracas at midday, in time to grab a late-afternoon island-hopper to Los Roques.

**DOMESTIC FLIGHTS:** At press time, there were two airlines operating flights to Los Roques and several charters. Ignore all but LTA (Linea Turistica Aereotuy; tuy.com). It flies a Dash 7, a four-engine monstrosity that can haul gobs of weight. Fly a smaller operator and your kite gear may be left in Caracas, dispatched to you piecemeal.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Lodging is on Gran Roque. You'll hire a water taxi to drop you at one of dozens of islands, and you (or someone from your hotel) will have to schlep gear to and from the boat. For this reason, stay at a waterfront *posada*. Your best bet is Posada La Gaviota (posadalagaviota.com), available with package rates from Vela Windsurf Resorts/Dare2Fly (velawindsurf.com). It's located steps from the marina, the meals are delectable and rooms are spacious and spotless. The owner,

German Olavarria, is an avid kiter who can arrange excursions and, if you ask nicely, take you to some of his favorite secret spots.

**GETTING AROUND:** Transport is via water taxis. Arrange your return trip for as late as possible — the best wind is typically between 2 p.m. and sunset. For downwinders, charter a boat. Contact Israel Alfonzo (58-414-248-4596; isralosroques@hotmail.com). He charges around \$300 a day, or less, depending on your haggling skills. He can take eight people with gear and will happily tail you for hours should you have a hankering for an all-day downwinder.

**MONEY:** Don't use credit cards, traveler's checks or ATMs — they are pegged to government rates. Bring greenbacks and swap on the black market for up to double the official exchange rate. Trade just enough in Caracas to pay airport taxes and buy a sandwich, then do your bartering in Gran Roque, where it's safer — whipping out Benjamins in Caracas can be dodgy.

**LOGISTICS:** The reservations gurus at Vela/Dare2Fly are experts in handling the nuttiness of Venezuelan travel. Let them do the legwork for you. They can also schedule lessons, equipment included, with Pernalles and Vieweg. Contact Karl Williams at 800-223-5443 or info@velawindsurf.com.



A sheer wall of rusting steel rises 300 feet from azure water. It's both terrifying and mesmerizing. I've kited into the set of *Waterworld*. But I can't get too close or it'll kill my wind.

We arrived intending to downwind back to Francisquí, but nobody has any intention of leaving these dreamy conditions. Still, after three hours (a span that flashes by in what seems like minutes) Alfonzo urges us to get a move on. It's 3:30 p.m. and he warns us that the late afternoon glare will make it impossible to see through the water. It's low tide, and en route to Francisquí we'll have to navigate a coral labyrinth scarcely 6 inches below the surface. Pernalles leaves first, zipping downwind on his 12-meter RRD. I follow close behind on my 12-meter Crossbow 2. We're both superpowered — the glassy water offers zero resistance. Pernalles banks starboard, pointing toward a long reef that will flank us throughout the downwinder. Fifty yards away, double-overhead surf is barreling toward us from the open sea, but it crashes onto exposed coral. Our ride is butter-smooth.

Everyone is trying to stay near Pernalles, who is zigzagging to avoid the numerous and virtually invisible coral heads. About four miles farther, the breeze climbs 5 knots and we're rocketing. We skirt a tiny mangrove islet, keeping our kites high to avoid its wind shadow. That's when I see the shipwreck. It's a monster, a gargantuan cargo ship perhaps 800 feet long that beached itself so ferociously hard on the reef it split clean in two. Local fishermen spotted the shattered vessel resting in the shallow water long after it foundered. Its crew had vanished, their origin unknown, and its contents long gone.

I kite toward it, tacking within 200 yards. A sheer wall of rusting steel rises 300 feet from azure water. It's both

terrifying and mesmerizing. I've kited into the set of *Waterworld*. But I can't get too close or it'll kill my wind. That doesn't stop Pernalles, who is riding between its broken halves, his kite passing mere feet from the severed hull. From my position, it almost looks like he's kiting through its empty hold. Hands down, it's the ballsiest kiting maneuver I've ever witnessed. Should he crash, he'd be ground into mincemeat by a nightmarish deathtrap of eddies, roiling white water, craggy coral heads and rusty shards of splintered steel. Thankfully, he makes a few passes for the camera (Nesbitt is shooting from *Caracol*) and gets the hell out.

It takes two more hours riding downwind through twinkling flat-water ecstasy to reach Francisquí. I don't want it to end. But the sun has dipped below the horizon and the orange sky has ignited the island in fiery hues. I tell Vieweg that I've never kited so far and for so long in water so smooth — I hardly hit a ripple bigger than a baseball. "There is nothing to stop the wind here," she reminds me. "And the reef keeps it very flat." Only Gran Roque boasts some meager elevation; its pinnacle lighthouse is perched at 400 feet. The rest of the islands lie perilously close to sea level. Luckily, Los Roques is too far south in the Northern Hemisphere to get hurricanes, but the islands cannot combat the inescapable siege of global warming. Pernalles and Vieweg have already relocated a portion of their house because of rising sea levels. "The water just got too close," says Vieweg. "In five years, we'll probably have to move the house again. Every year the sea gets higher. It's frightening. Los Roques is beginning to slowly disappear and in 50 years, it probably won't exist at all." ●

Clockwise from top: Vieweg and the author get a closer look at the shipwreck. Designated kite area. Opposite from bottom: A kiter's perspective of paradise. Downwinder dropoff. Michael Behar on assignment.

