



## The Lost Treasure of Robinson Crusoe Island

March 9, 2010 11:30 AM

*[Robinson Crusoe Island](#), which lies 400 miles west of Chile in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, was hit by a tsunami--a 65-foot wave struck the island after an magnitude 8.8 earthquake rocked the Chilean mainland. **Margie Goldsmith** has visited Robinson Crusoe Island, and shares the story of a local family.*



The 400-million-year-old Robinson Crusoe Island is a Polynesian Island with rain forests, lush valleys, cascading streams, and mountain peaks rising 3,000 feet. It's the kind of island that should be filled with tourists, especially now when it's summer in the Southern Hemisphere. But even without a tsunami, tourists have not yet discovered Robinson Crusoe Island because it's such an inaccessible destination. You can only get there in a five-seat plane once a week--if the weather allows--and you land on a matchbox-sized strip between two mountains; or you can come via boat, which sails only once every 45 days and takes 30 hours

from the mainland.

Robinson Crusoe Island is part of the [Juan Fernández archipelago](#) composed of Isla Santa Clara, Isla Tierra, and Isla Afuera. In 1968 the government renamed the islands in order to promote tourism, and now Santa Clara is called Robinson Crusoe and Isla Afuera is Alexander Selkirk Island. Scotsman Alexander Selkirk was the sailor on whom Daniel Defoe based the book *Robinson Crusoe*. Selkirk's violent temper got him dropped off on Isla Santa Clara in 1704 where he was marooned for four years and four months before finally being rescued.

Each day, searching the horizon for a ship to rescue him, Selkirk climbed to a cliff high on the island. But for years, only enemy ships passed by and if they landed, the marooned sailor had to race deep into the forest and hide. Selkirk lived in complete solitude, and today, visitors who make the steep trek through the forest will see the remains of Selkirk's forest hut: a big hole in the ground surrounded by a crumbling stone wall. Hike to the top of the cliff looking out over Cumberland Bay, and you'll see a plaque hammered into the rock, commemorating Selkirk's lookout point.



Six months ago, I visited Robinson Crusoe Island because I like remote destinations without hordes of other tourists and because I hoped to see the place where a real marooned sailor had lived. When the small plane touched down on the airstrip, Pedro Niada, my guide and host, was waiting. Niada lives in the only inhabited town on the island, San Juan Batista in Cumberland Bay: population, 629; main occupation, lobster fishing. Here, Niada owns a three-bedroom inn, Hostal [Club Pez Volador](#) (Flying Fish Club) that took eight years to build (everything had to be shipped in from the mainland), and has been open less than three years.



Before the tsunami, visitors arriving by plane could choose to walk or take a boat to the village in Cumberland Bay on the other side of the 12-mile-long island. The boat trip takes 1.5 hours and is in a small, open fishing vessel. First, you must walk a mile from the airport down to the water, past a colony of braying sea lions. The other way to get to the village is to hike six or seven hours--and that's what I'd chosen to do--through the rain forest and over the mountain with Pedro (*left*) leading the way.

Pedro, originally from Santiago, speaks excellent English because he studied at a British school in Los Angeles for two years. In 1992, he came to Robinson Crusoe as an invited guest and hiked, fished, and snorkeled the crystal-clear turquoise waters for a month. Robinson

Crusoe is considered one of the best diving spots in the world, and Pedro returned the following year and met his future wife, Fabianna, who was vacationing from Mendoza. In 1999, the same year he married, he earned his scuba instructor's license.

Until the big wave hit, Niada was a scuba, hiking, and fly-fishing guide, a professional photographer, and owner of Club Pez Volador, an eclectic inn right over Cumberland Bay. Here, Pedro and Fabianna lived with their two children, Dante (8) and Lucecita (4), who attended the local school. The hostel offered breakfast and dinner to guests, including succulent spiny lobster. My room there was spacious, and each morning I'd sit on the deck sipping coffee as the small fishing boats, silhouetted against the rising sun, headed out to sea. After, I would hike with Pedro, past the small school and local library where there are versions of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 18 languages, past the church and cemetery, and up into the caves or the hills to view Selkirk's lookout point and home in the forest.

I had partially come in search of the real Robinson Crusoe, but my trip became a different kind of quest when Niada told me about the buried treasure on the island, a legendary pirate hangout. In 1760, English seaman Cornelius Webb buried a treasure said to contain 864 bags of gold, 200 bars of gold, 21 barrels of precious stones and jewelry, one golden trunk with a two-foot high gold and emerald rose, and 160 chests of gold and silver coins. Webb's men buried the treasure and when they returned to the ship, Webb blew up the vessel, killing all the men so no one but himself would know of the treasure. A genuine treasure map has been found and the island has always buzzed with stories of where the treasure is buried. Bernard Kaiser, a Chicago entrepreneur who had so far spent close to \$1 million on his search, claimed he was hot on its trail, but that was before the wave struck. As Pedro walked me to the cave to point out clues of Webb's visit, I asked him, "So is there really a treasure?" "The island is our treasure," he said.



But since last week, Robinson Crusoe Island is no longer such a treasure. On February 27th, at 3:41 a.m., an earthquake with a magnitude of 8.8 struck Concepción, Chile. Less than twenty minutes later, a 65-foot wave pounded Robinson Crusoe Island, 400 miles west. Pedro Niada, Fabianna, and their two children were sound asleep, but a guest on the second-floor awoke and noticed water seeping through the floor. He looked out the window and thought he was seeing things: there was a fishing boat out the window, almost at eye level, and in the

distance, a wall of water was racing toward shore. The guest woke the family and the five of them jumped into the boat, clinging to it with all their strength until the wave passed. Finally, they steered it to shore and raced up the hill just before two more giant waves hit.

And then all was quiet. But the Niada inn, the other homes along the water, the school, municipality offices, fishermen's shacks, shops, and church, were all reduced to broken glass, soggy planks of wood, and mud. Fifteen people died and twenty-two are still missing. Two days later, the Chilean army sent boats and planes to evacuate the islanders. Fabianna and the two children left the island and are now temporarily housed in a Santiago hotel. The family is

still in shock. Four-year-old Lucecita says sadly, "My bicycle is dead." Eight-year-old Dante looks at his mother and asks, "When are we going to go back home?"



Pedro Niada is still on Robinson Crusoe Island, sitting on the edge of the shore where his inn once stood. Like Robinson Crusoe, who looked out over Cumberland Bay waiting for a rescue ship, Niada waits for some of his family possessions to wash back to shore. His home, so recently a place of love and warmth is now a gaping hole, similar to what is left of Selkirk's forest hut. Niada looks back to where his home and Club Pez Volador once stood and says, "The wave took everything from our hostel, but not our dreams."

Some day, hopefully soon, Pedro and Fabianna Niada will be able to rebuild what they lost so intrepid travelers can once again share the beauty and bounty of Robinson Crusoe Island. To help the Niadas and see photos of the island after the tsunami, visit: [www.endemica.com](http://www.endemica.com).

*Photos: Top photo, Pedro Niada; Below photos Margie Goldsmith*