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Member-only story

All the Pretty Horses

The Captivating (and Sometimes Vulnerable) Horses of Vieques



Tom Bentley

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We likely could have brought a horse into our living room, though we never asked. Asking a horse would have been easy: small groups of them walked by our house in Vieques every day, sometimes pattering about, sometimes moving like they had to make an appointment.

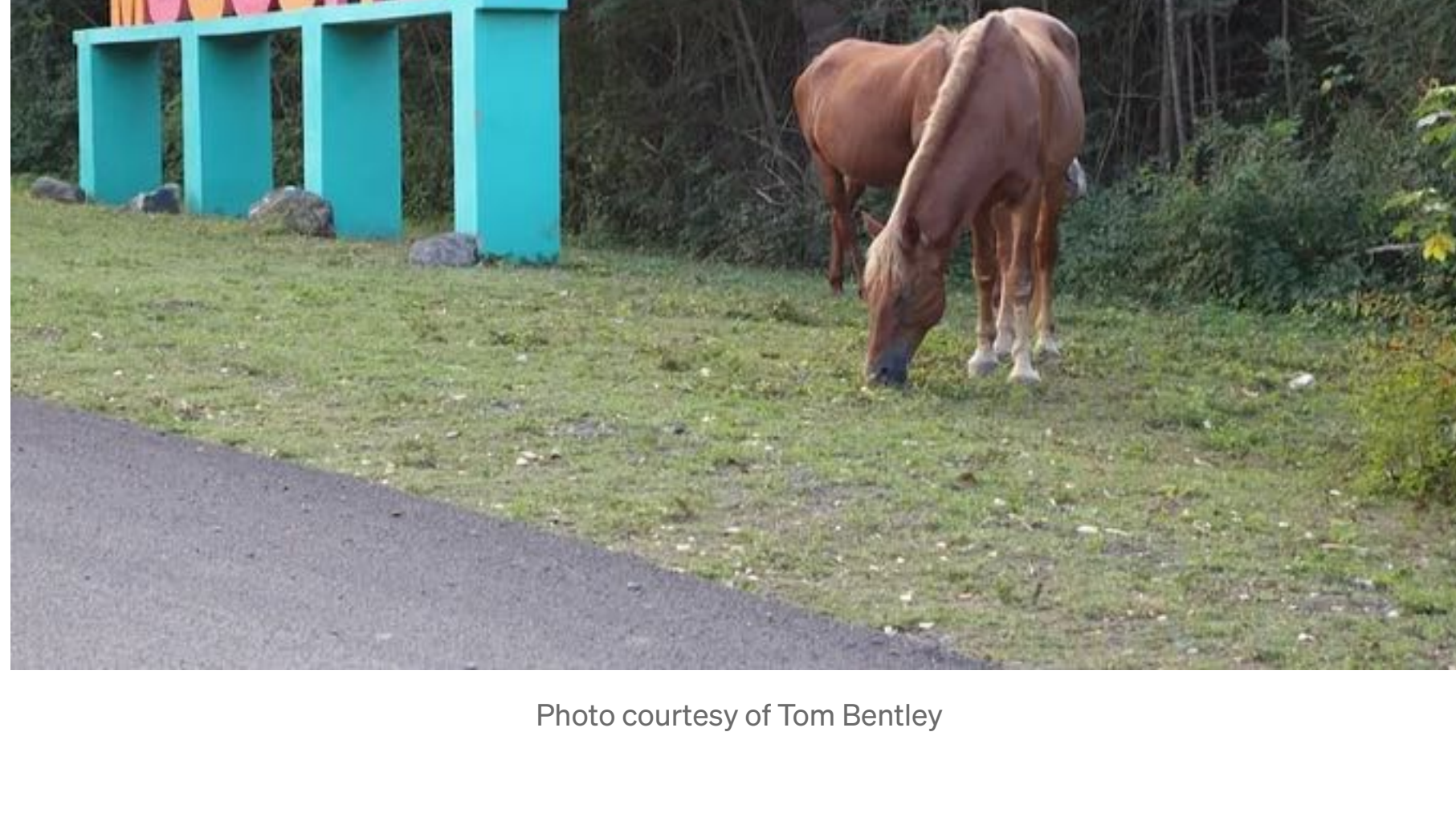


Photo courtesy of Tom Bentley

But the beasts weren't merely traipsing about in our neighborhood: they were all over the island, and all over means everywhere we drove, hiked, walked. They trotted the streets of the main towns, Isabel Segunda and Esperanza (and between the two), they were in the hills high above the waters, they were near the harbors, they were in the woodsy areas, and they clustered near the airport.

Near the house we stayed at for several weeks, they ate leaves off bushes and the low-hanging branches of trees. A guy on a bicycle passed our house with one on a rope, and we did see a group of riders on them in procession on our local beach. But mostly we saw them unsaddled and unperturbed, everywhere.

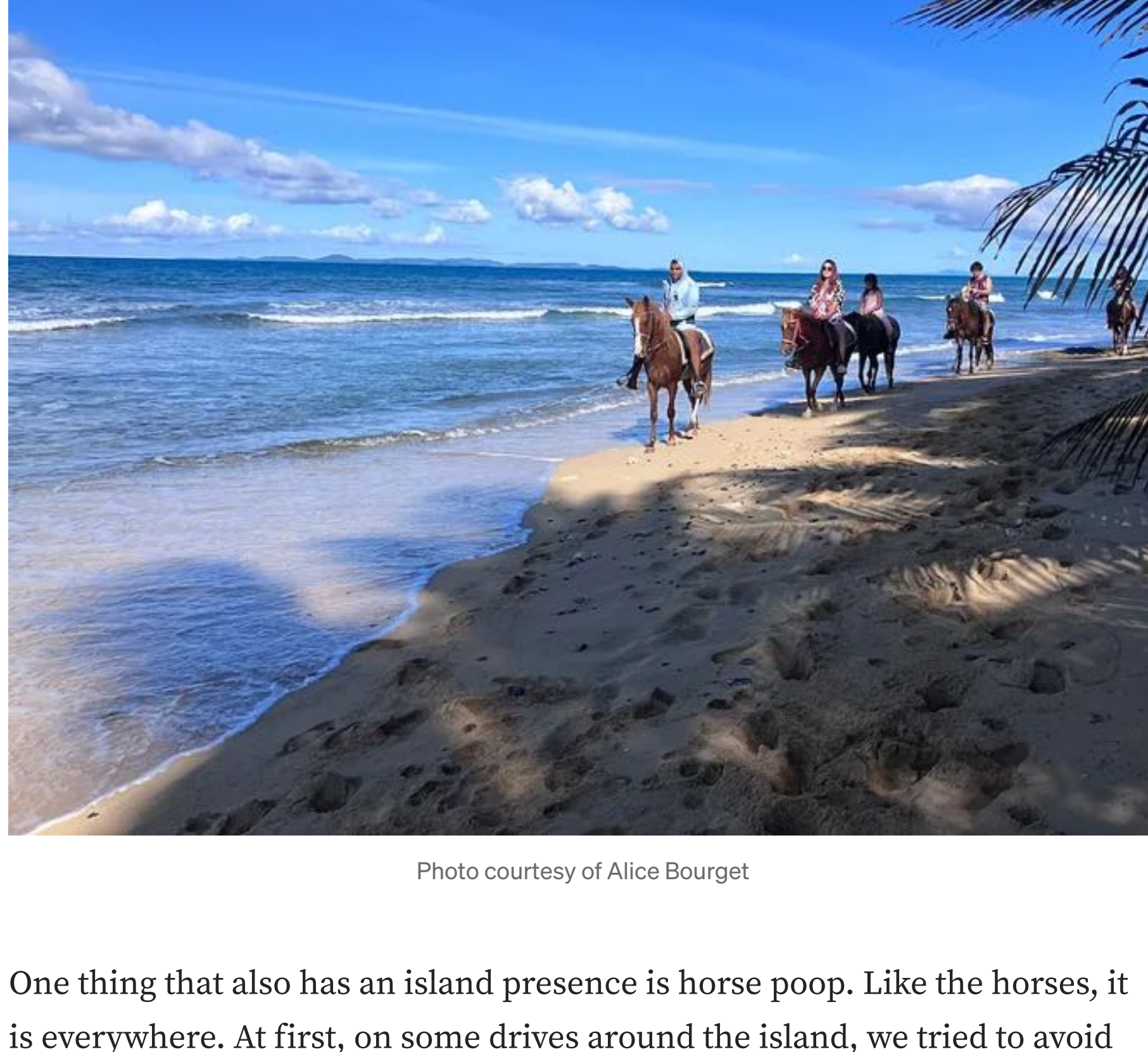


Photo courtesy of Alice Bourget

One thing that also has an island presence is horse poop. Like the horses, it is everywhere. At first, on some drives around the island, we tried to avoid the ubiquitous piles, but that is futile. Drive on, wash the fenders later.

Most of the horses on the island are free and unconstrained, but they aren't exactly wild. The majority are owned by residents, but many islanders can't afford the feed and care of the horses, so they let them roam to forage on their own. Over the years, there have been a number of municipal efforts to administer contraceptives to the horses and to restrict their free roaming, but those efforts have failed.

More than once we saw horses digging through overturned garbage cans in Isabel; often we saw animals with sharply outlined ribs. Twice we saw what looked like very young horses dead by the roadside.

Most of the horses are Paso Finos (or of that bloodline), admired by riders for their brisk and smooth-stepping gait. What a delight to see a line of happy riders go by, the hooves of the animals making a rhythmic clipped beat on the pavement. We hiked on many of the island's nice trails, particularly in the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge, many of which led to spectacular beaches. Horses were often on the approach roads to these trails, many of them grazing on the grassy or bushy surrounds.

Having grown accustomed to seeing them everywhere, we were yet surprised to encounter one relaxing athwart the trail we were walking on to the wonderful Caracas Beach. We skirted it, without it giving us much heed; it was likely resting up from a Paso Fino dance session on the dirt.



Photo courtesy of Tom Bentley

We sometimes warily approached a group, talking softly, and they mostly moved away slowly, with us likely more scared than they.

Many times we had to stop the car and wait for them to move off the road, or drive at a snail's pace around them. We never had a close incident, but you could imagine a reckless driver barreling into one. But there was something sweet in seeing them so often; horses, even skinny ones, are beautiful animals, and they have a presence.

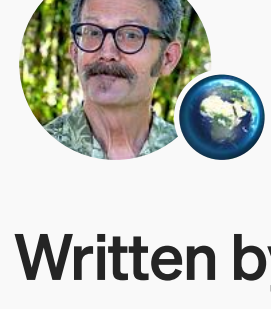
We became accustomed to seeing them on the road, but almost always remarked on them when we saw them. We haven't been gone from Vieques all that long, but we already miss how the horses were a fascinating — and often beautiful — characteristic of the island.

Check out Hooves on the Ground <https://www.vqshooves.org> and the Vieques Island Animal Sanctuary <https://viequesanimalsanctuary.org/new-programs/> to get information on care for the horses and other animals on the island.

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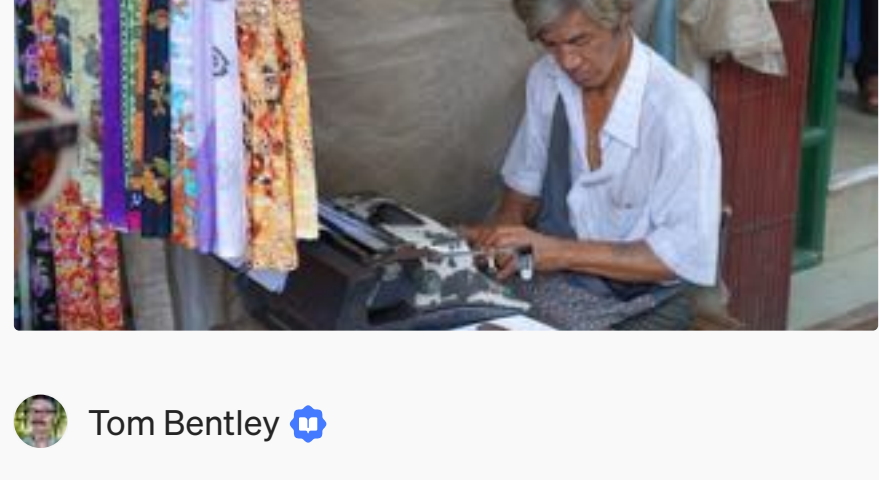
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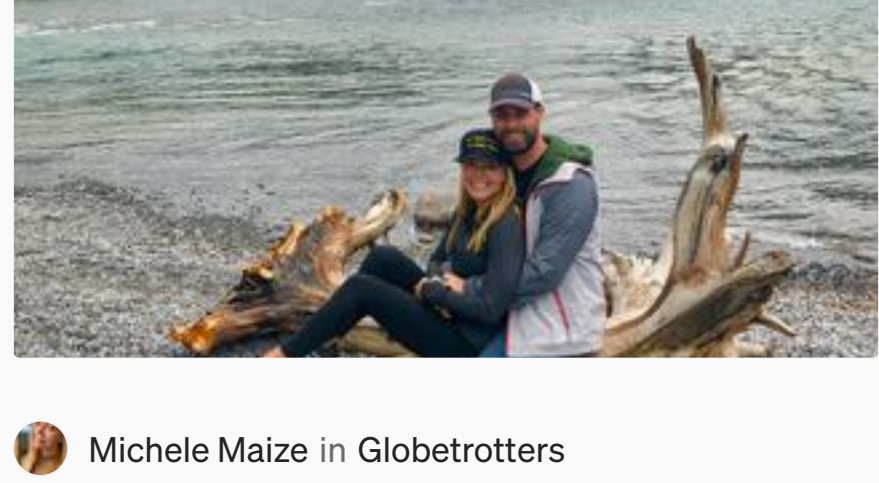
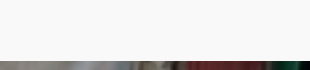
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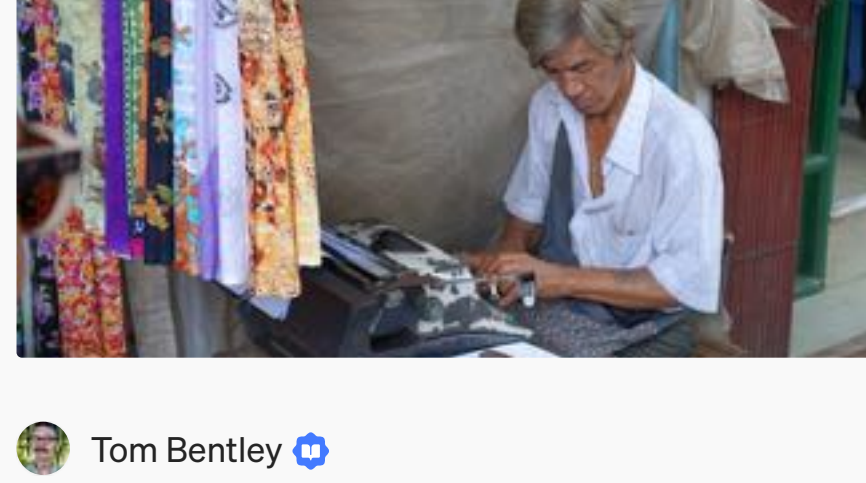
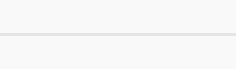
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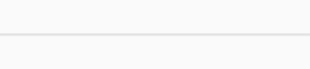
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