



Off the beaten route

Delivering mail in the U.S. territories



Top: Old San Juan in Puerto Rico

Map: Guam is located in the western Pacific and is the largest island in Micronesia.

Above: A license plate for Guam

This time of year, as snow, ice and frigid air make many letter carriers' daily lives a challenge, some dream of warm tropical islands. For those of us in the 50 states, it's easy to forget that there are some such islands beyond Hawaii that are territories of the United States and also are served by the U.S. Postal Service. Carrying the mail in these places can be a little different than in the mainland. Here's a *National Geographic*-style look at life as a letter carrier in the U.S. territories where NALC has members.

Just 31 letter carriers deliver the mail to the 160,000 residents of Guam, an island 4,000 miles west of Hawaii. The letter carriers on Guam—all members of Guam's Branch 4093—don't experience snow or ice on the job, as the island is just a few hundred miles from the equator. But the weather takes its toll in other ways.

"It's hot in Guam," Branch 4093 Vice President **Manuel Fejerang** said. "There's 70, 80, 90 percent humidity. We get more than 100 inches of rain a year. It's hard being a carrier on Guam

because of the humidity—and because of all the parcels."

Each carrier on Guam handles many more parcels than the typical mainland carrier because the island is remote, Fejerang said. "We have a lot of parcel delivery on Guam because everything is so expensive here, so people order things on the Internet" that get shipped from overseas. A typical Monday may involve 100 or more parcels for each carrier. Fejerang said he laughs when he visits the mainland United States and sees comparatively few packages inside a loaded LLV.

Fejerang was born on Guam to a father in the Navy, but the family moved away from the island when Fejerang was a young child. He returned as a young man and took a letter carrier job. He has carried mail on the island for 37 years.

Guam was a Spanish colony from 1668 until the United States took possession of the island in 1898 after the Spanish-American War. During World War II, Japan occupied Guam until U.S. troops recaptured the island on July 21, 1944, a date islanders celebrate

annually as Liberation Day. Guam now hosts several U.S. military installations, including large Navy and Air Force bases. The island still copes with a new kind of invader, though—snakes and several other invasive species brought by visitors, on purpose or as stowaways. The island had no native snakes, and the invaders have nearly wiped out the island's bird population.

Guam is one of several U.S. territories with varying self-government arrangements, including the Pacific island territories of American Samoa, the Northern Marianas, and in the Atlantic, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. As a U.S. territory, Guam is not part of any state, so civic life is a bit different. By an act of Congress, the people of Guam and some other territories are allowed to elect a government, but they have no vote in Congress. Voters in the territories don't vote in presidential elections either, though they can help select the candidates through political party primaries.

Gone are the days when walking around Guam could lead to an encounter with an unexploded bomb left over from the war, Ferejang said, though construction sites still require bomb sweeps and some areas of the island remain off-limits because of the danger.

Being thousands of miles from USPS headquarters doesn't spare Guam's carriers the headaches of dealing with postal management. A few years ago, USPS tried to force most islanders to accept cluster boxes instead of door-to-door delivery, claiming—with little evidence to back it up—that some roads on Guam were unsafe for postal trucks. The decision was largely reversed after NALC filed a grievance.

Though Guam's carriers don't deal with snow or ice, they face a different threat—typhoons (the western Pacific name for a hurricane). Typhoons and hurricanes are the price that residents of balmy tropical islands pay for their otherwise pleasant

Unexploded bombs can still be an issue in Guam. U.S. sailors look over a World War II five-inch round that has been rendered safe.

weather, and dealing with the aftermath of a storm can make delivering mail in snow and ice sound easy.

Raymond Harrison, secretary of Christiansted Branch 6413 on St. Croix, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands, remembers working after Hurricane Hugo slammed directly into St. Croix early in the morning of Sept. 18, 1989 (he still remembers the date—it's as memorable to islanders as Sept. 11, 2001, or Dec. 7, 1941). The Category 4 storm packed violent, 140-mile-per-hour winds—some residents reported seeing huge tornado-like vortices. Nearly all of the infrastructure on this Caribbean island of just 83 square miles was severely damaged or destroyed, including more than 90 percent of homes.

"Hugo devastated the island so bad that we had to move into one postal facility" for the whole island, Harrison said. Electrical power was out island-wide. Roads were washed out or filled with debris; food and supplies were scarce. "Many trees were down," Harrison recalls, and trees left standing were stripped of their leaves. "They looked like they were burnt."

While Hugo was one of the worst storms in memory, St. Croix experiences a direct hit from a hurricane about once every seven years. Most Americans think of turkey in November for the Thanksgiving holiday, but residents of the Virgin Islands also celebrate the end of a quiet tropical storm season on "Hurricane Thanksgiving Day" on the third Monday of October, a tradition they have followed since 1726.

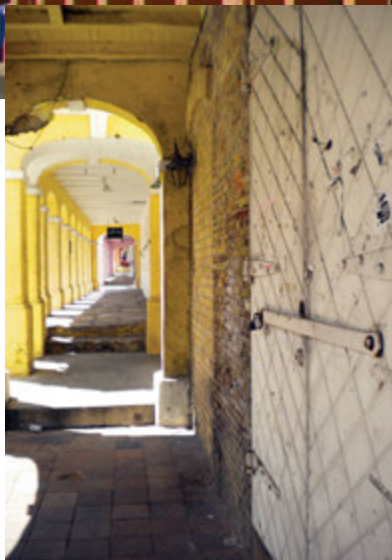
After storms, letter carriers play an important role by delivering essential supplies, documents and money to beleaguered island residents in devastated neighborhoods. But while dealing with the aftermath of storms on the job, Harrison said, carriers also must cope with the storm's effects at home. Their own homes may be damaged and access to food and safe drinking water for their families limited. Recovery can take



U.S. Navy photo by Jesse Leon Guerrero/Released



The U.S. Virgin Islands are part of a chain of islands between Florida and South America.



Top and above: Scenes of Christiansted on St. Croix

Volunteers clean a St. Croix hospital after a recent hurricane flooded the building.

Photo courtesy of All Hands Volunteers Photobank



longer because, unlike areas of the mainland damaged by a storm where trucks can move in fast, a small island must wait for relief and rebuilding supplies to arrive by air or sea. After Hugo, power wasn't fully restored on the island for several months.

"You have to come to work and you have to worry about your family," Harrison said. "You do what you have to do." Besides dealing with storms, Harrison said, carrying mail in the Caribbean is no different from on the mainland. "Yes, we have hurricane season but that would be the only difference. To me, it's basically doing the same job."

After ripping into St. Croix, Hugo hit the island's neighbor to the northwest, Puerto Rico. **John Kennedy Rivera**, president of San Juan, PR Branch 869, recalled that letter carriers showed their dedication following that storm as they do after most storms.

"We keep going forward no matter what," he said. "After a storm, sometimes there's better attendance than a regular day," because carriers know they will be needed to pitch in to get the mail out, even though the homes of some may have been damaged or destroyed and they face food and water shortages.

Though only 70 miles of placid ocean

separate St. Croix and Puerto Rico, the two islands have had very different histories and paths toward becoming part of the United States.

On the eve of the United States' entry into World War I in 1917, St. Croix was sold by Denmark to the United States along with several other islands, including St. Thomas, that became the U.S. Virgin Islands. (Great Britain still owns the rest of the island group known as the British Virgin Islands.) The sale, for \$25 million, prevented Germany from occupying the Virgin Islands in case it declared war on Denmark. It also gave the U.S. Navy a new presence in the Atlantic, where German U-boats already were prowling. And it gave residents of the new territory access to America's markets and, a decade later, U.S. citizenship. Most residents of the Virgin Islands speak English.

Christopher Columbus claimed the island that became known as Puerto Rico (Spanish for "rich port") for Spain on his second voyage to the New World in 1493. It remained part of the Spanish empire for four centuries until, as with Guam, it was won by the United States after the Spanish-American War. Since then, the island's 3.9 million residents—a population far larger than any other U.S. territory—have debated whether they want independence, statehood, more self-governing power as a territory, or the status quo. While some Puerto Ricans speak both English and Spanish, which are the two official languages, most speak only Spanish.

Language is one thing that makes Puerto Rico unique among places to deliver mail,

Puerto Rico lies just west of the Virgin Islands and just east of the Dominican Republic.



Ponce, PR Branch 826 President **Carlos Rosario** said. Carriers need bilingual skills because the postal exam is offered only in English—but knowledge of Spanish and of Puerto Rican geography is essential for matching deliveries to the proper addresses, since many addresses and street layouts on the island aren't standard, often following old traditions or neighborhood names rather than logical layouts.

"To be a letter carrier in Puerto Rico is a unique thing," Rosario said. Reading an address often isn't enough—a carrier would still be lost without a familiarity with the area. More than one street with the same name and address numbers may occur in the same ZIP code. Some streets on the island have no names at all, and some buildings have no numbers.

"It's not logical to get to the place" just by reading the address, he said. "You have to know the place."

As one of the earliest places in the Western Hemisphere to be colonized by Europeans—San Juan, the capital city, dates to 1508—Puerto Rico sports many narrow streets laid out before the automobile was invented. Postal trucks cannot serve many cities or towns, and as a result, the island has some of the longest walking routes in the United States.

"We may have to walk eight miles or more to do eight hours," Rosario said, typically with 1,000 or more delivery points. A route of that length is possible for a single carrier only because mail volume is often light, he added. On an average day, as many as half of the addresses on long routes may have no mail.

Rivera pointed to the mountain town of Jayuya, which is served by a single carrier who walks 10.9 miles each day. In the coastal town of Aguirre, one route has 3,100 possible deliveries, he said.

With that kind of service, it's no wonder that letter carriers are well-known and

Photo by August Rode



highly respected. "People look up to you like you have a good job," Rivera said. "We're very proud to wear the uniform; we feel proud to be letter carriers."

Half of the carriers in Puerto Rico wore a U.S. military uniform before joining the Postal Service, Rivera said, and some are reservists. Rivera and Rosario are Army veterans. A carrier with a military background typically brings organizational skills, physical toughness and mental alertness, along with bilingual ability, to the job.

The typical carrier in Puerto Rico also is a proud union member, Rivera said. NALC membership for his branch is just shy of 100 percent. "Unions are very strong in Puerto Rico," he said. "When we believe in something, we are passionate."

Though living in the territories means different rules of citizenship, there's no difference to letter carriers' union membership once they join NALC. Several carriers from the territories will travel to Philadelphia this July to stand as delegates at NALC's national convention.

"I look forward to seeing our brothers and sisters from the territories in Philadelphia," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "They remind us that no matter how different our work conditions are or how far away we live from each other, we're all the same." **PR**



Top: San Juan, Puerto Rico, as seen from the air.

Above: The Aguirre, Puerto Rico, Post Office