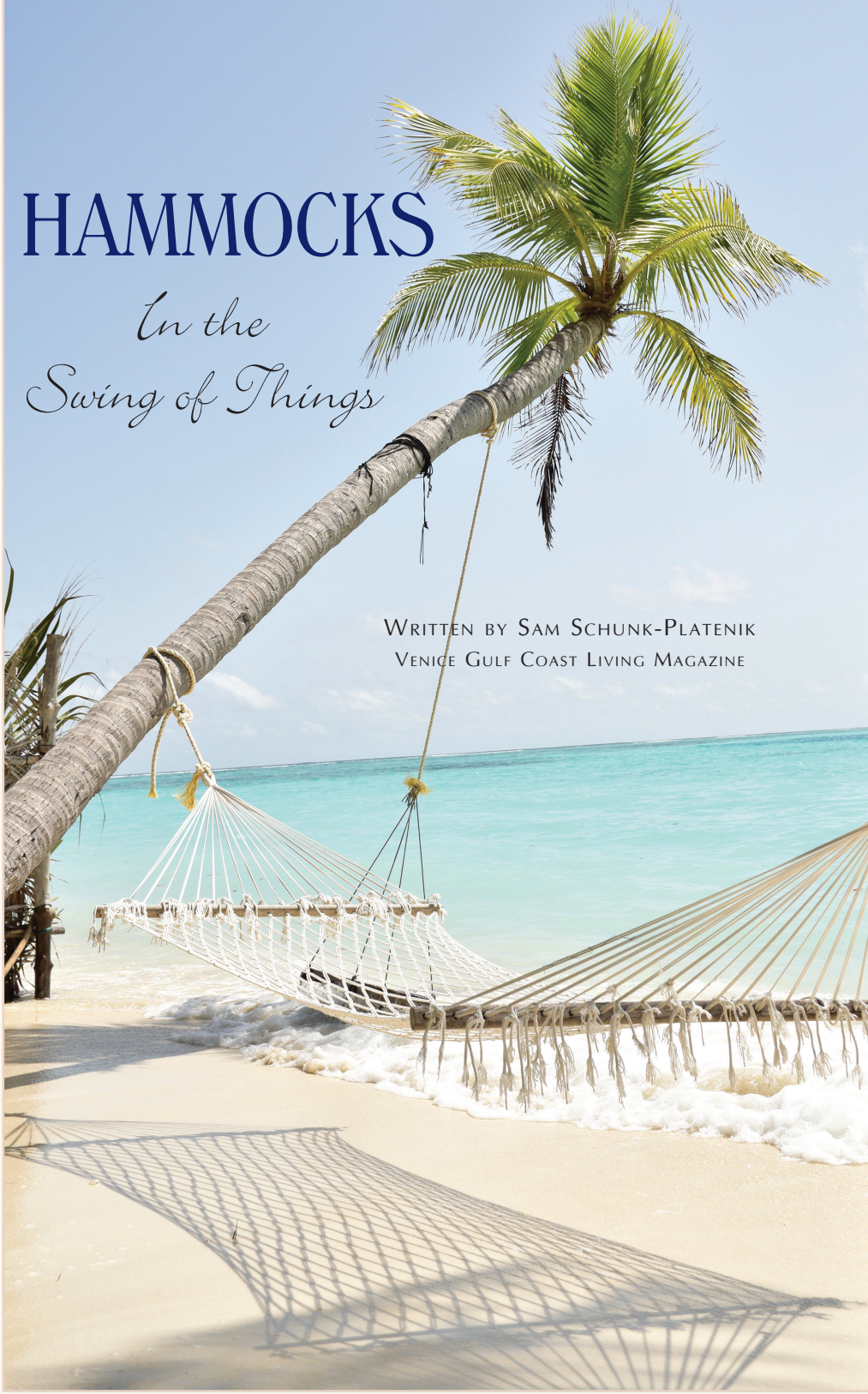
HAMMOCKS

In the Swing of Things



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A refreshing way to enjoy our area's coastal breezes, especially as the weather warms from spring to summer, is from the comfort of a hammock. Wrapped up in our cozy cocoon, we may delight in reading a book, taking a nap or simply relaxing while light winds gently sway us back and forth.

As the calm rocking eases your mind, perhaps you have wondered about the origins of these soothing slings. Although the exact year cannot be pinpointed with complete certainty, the general consensus amongst anthropologists and historians is that the hammock dates back about a millennium ago when the Mayans and other indigenous peoples of Central America crafted them from plant fibers or tree bark. These suspended beds served a highly practical purpose: by elevating the body, the hammock prevented contact with the ground below and also afforded protection from pesky or dangerous creatures such as rodents and snakes. According to the writings of several 16th-century explorers, hot coals or a small fire were often set below their berths to provide warmth or ward off insects so they could enjoy a restful night's sleep.

Among experts, it is believed that Christopher Columbus and his men were the first Europeans to observe—and possibly try out—the hammock during the explorers' visit to the Bahamas where they encountered the Taino people, an Arawakan tribe of the Caribbean islands. As he wrote, "A great many Indians in canoes came to the ship to-day (sic) for the purpose of bartering their cotton, and *hamacas*, or nets, in which they sleep." When Columbus returned to Spain, he brought several of these woven sleeping nets with him.

Throughout the colonial era, Spaniards and other Europeans introduced the peoples of the New World to cotton, canvas and other types of cloth, many of which were eventually employed by traditional hammock weavers along with more time-honored materials. In part because of their soothing motion and hygiene benefits, hammocks became more popular than the stationary beds of the colonists' native lands in many parts of present-day Latin America. In 1570, the Portuguese-born chronicler of colonial Brazilian history, Pero de Magalhães Gandavo wrote, "Most of the beds in Brazil are hammocks, hung in the house from two cords. This custom they took from the Indians of the land."

By the mid-16th century, these sleeping slings made their way from the mainland to use below-deck on boats traveling around the world. The advantages were considerable. To begin, because of the constant motion of the ship, beds on