



ANTIGUA

365

A beach for every day of the year, and Terry Ward aims to hit them all. She'll have to stay focused — this 108-square-mile gem has other stories it wants her to tell.

STORY BY TERRY WARD PHOTOS BY MATT DUTILE



It's early morning. Dew clings to the leaves of silk trees lining a path in Antigua's rugged southern reaches. Up the trail I go past Wallings Reservoir.

Built in 1890, the reservoir's Victorian-industrial terraces — in full view as they're bone-dry — are a testament to more abundant times. But despite the drought that's been plaguing Antigua and other islands in the region for several years, this verdant pocket is surprisingly lush. The canopy is a mix of 40 tree species, including mahogany, Spanish oak, Dominican kidney mango, hog plum, soursop and wild passion fruit. Beyond that, a fragrant field of lemon grass bends in the breeze atop the island's thin layer of volcanic soil. The view reminds me of New Zealand, minus the wayward sheep.

Antigua's 108 square miles of rolling hills and pocketed coastline sprawl around us. On a clearer day, neighboring Montserrat and Guadeloupe are easy to spot. The only thing absent are the waterfalls and rushing rivers typical on islands like Jamaica and Dominica. What's not missing: that beloved border of sand and sea.

The tiny island nation of Antigua and Barbuda counts 365 beaches (some of which are "two-steppers," says local guide Cleo Henry) along its combined coastline. So, with the mercury rising and beach towel packed, I set off on a road trip along coastal routes to hit as many of them as possible.

Most visitors arrive and promptly plop into a beach chair to Zen out on the sapphire view. But in trekking from strand to strand, it's clear the island has other stories to tell. Carlisle Bay is an 82-suite hotel at the southern end of Fig Tree Drive, Antigua's most scenic route that cuts through the southern rainforest. After a couple hours relaxing by Carlisle Bay lagoon, I meander down to Fig Tree Studio Art Gallery. Here, Antiguan Dasa Spencer and his British painter wife, Sallie Harker, sell their own works, as well as art by other Caribbean artists, from a gallery surrounded by flowering fruit trees.

From top: Sheer Rocks' tuna tartare. Playing cricket at Half Moon Bay. The menu at Garden Grill. Opposite: Sheer Rocks' view of Little Ffryes Beach.





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"[Antigua has] the sweetest fruits — sugar apple, guava and sugar cane," says Spencer. "They're smaller and more condensed." Having just sampled a mango found on the side of the road (an islander's bonus, a mainlander's treasure), I know what he means.

"In the good years, we plant a lot so that we have more in the dry years. But the island's new crop is houses," says Spencer, referring to Antigua's rush of development. Tourism first started here in the 1960s, when Antigua was a playground for English aristocrats. Today, it's positively booming, with a wave of new resorts, a brand-new airport and new non-stop flights from the U.S.

Many of the beaches on the island's desertlike east coast are cliff-lined or rocky. But at Half Moon Bay on the southeast shore, I meet a Guyanese family playing cricket on a crescent of sand where a new all-inclusive resort will rise next year. The abandoned hotel was shuttered in 1995 when it was destroyed during Hurricane Luis, which devastated the island. The family's patriarch tells me he doesn't expect the resort's arrival to change the ambience too much on the quiet easternmost end of his favorite beach, which he predicts will continue to draw mostly locals for Sunday outings.

Another day, during stops at Hawksbill Bay and Darkwood Beach on Antigua's sandier west coast, I have the aquarium-like water almost entirely to myself.

With such splendid anchorages to explore, Antigua has long been a sailor's island. And during the winter sailing season and annual Antigua Sailing Week in late April and early May, yachties arrive from all over the world.

From left: Carlisle Bay's beach. Sailing on *Camelot*. Mint and lime cooler from Jacqui O's Beach House. Opposite: Indigo Restaurant's blackened lionfish.

"It's one of the hardest places in the Caribbean to sail to, coming from the East Coast of the U.S., but you're golden once you get here," says German Capt. Christian Koch of charter operator Cruise and Chill Sailing. We depart Jolly Harbour aboard his 44-foot sailboat, *Camelot*.

We cruise near a shallow shipwreck in the clear waters of Deep Bay. Koch's favorite beach, Pinching Bay, is within reach, but there's no time to stop. I ask him what made a sailor who's called into nearly every port in the Caribbean drop anchor here. "I can't explain it," he says, "Antigua is just my speed."

Indeed, the island has a sort of indefinable casualness enlivened with quintessential Caribbean and international influences that set it apart from the mass resort coasts of Jamaica and über-exclusive enclaves a la St. Barth. My accommodations at St. James's Club & Villas, on a secluded bay on the east side, only underscore the casual vibe.

On the south coast, my search for strands is abandoned. Instead, I follow the scent of frying fish to Copper and Lumber Store Hotel at





**good
to
know**



WHEN TO GO
For the coolest and driest weather, December through April is the best

time to visit, but expect crowds and high-season prices. The annual Antigua Sailing Week, the Caribbean's largest regatta, takes place April 29-May 5 in 2017, with the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta just before. Carnival, at the end of July, also packs in the visitors. During the rest of

summer (hurricane season), you'll have most of the beaches to yourself.

HOW TO GET HERE
American Airlines offers one daily nonstop from Miami and New York (JFK), and a weekly nonstop from Charlotte to V.C. Bird International Airport (ANU).

United Airlines has 10 weekly nonstop flights from Newark. Delta flies from Atlanta once per week. JetBlue has three weekly nonstops from JFK.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO
Antigua and Barbuda's official currency is the East Caribbean

dollar (EC), but U.S. dollars are widely accepted (expect change in EC). Carry small EC bills for fruit stands, tips and admission. Some gas stations only accept cash. Restaurants, shops and hotels generally take major credit cards. If you plan to rent a car, it's left-side driving, and you'll have to

pay \$20 for the mandatory temporary driving permit, available at all car-rental agencies.

WHERE TO STAY
CARLISLE BAY
At this all-suite hotel, doubles start at \$575, with a 10-night minimum stay during the holiday season. Hobie Cats, kayaks and

paddleboards are free for guest use.

ST. JAMES'S CLUB & VILLAS
This secluded property has rooms overlooking the ocean; private villas come with full kitchens. Doubles start at \$390 per night, all-inclusive, with a three-night minimum stay.

THE VERANDAH RESORT & SPA
Located close to Stingray City, this all-inclusive offers suites and two-bedroom villas with private terraces, most of which overlook the ocean. Doubles start at \$366 per night, all-inclusive, with a minimum stay of three nights.

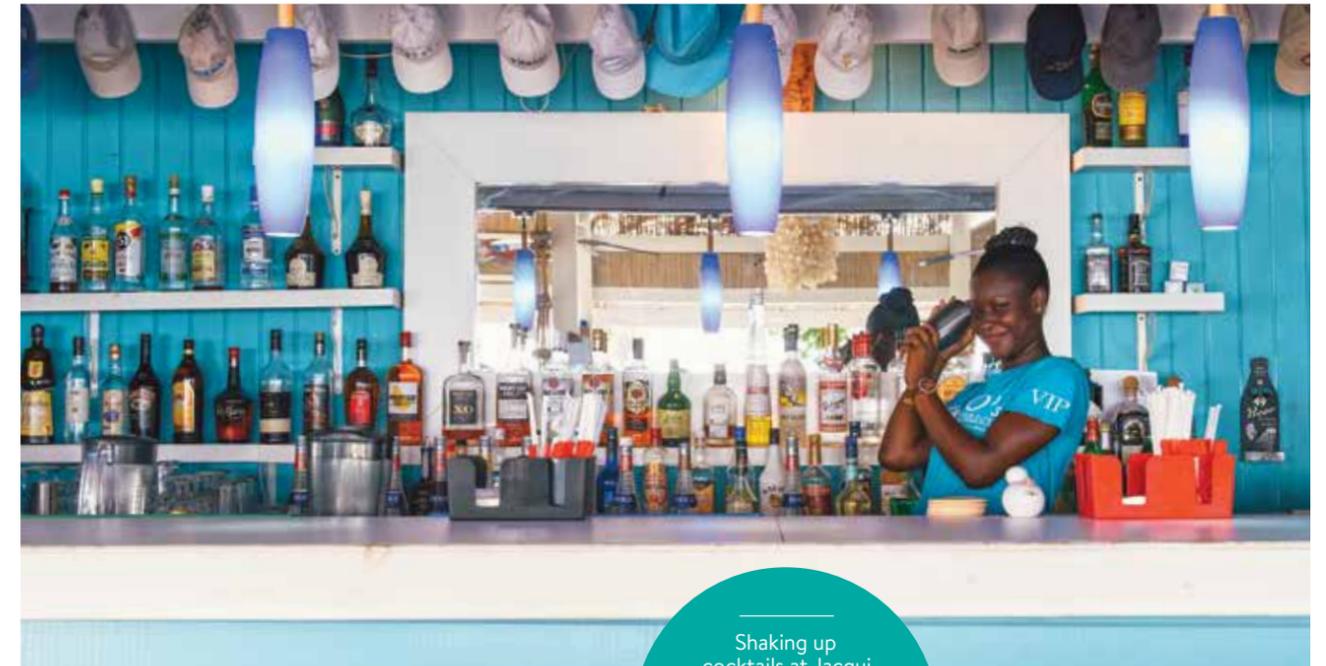


A boy runs along a stretch of sand at Half Moon Bay, on Antigua's rugged east coast. Many locals gather here on Sundays to play cricket.



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A Sunday-evening visit to Shirley Heights is a must. The steel-drum band plays ABBA's "Dancing Queen," and the scent of jerk chicken fills the air.



Shaking up cocktails at Jacqui O's Beach House. Opposite: The long-abandoned hotel on Half Moon Bay will soon be replaced by an all-inclusive resort.

Nelson's Dockyard. The colonial courtyard fronting the harbor is crowded with locals sitting at long tables, digging into whole fried snapper, coconut shrimp, peppery conch water and copious rum punches.

I've been told over and over that a Sunday-evening visit to the overlook at Shirley Heights is a must. It's like a giant outdoor concert, with a handful of staff directing cars to park on a huge grass lawn as tourists and locals file in.

Just past a sign that says "Do not stand beyond this point," crowds pick their ways across the rocks, angling their selfie sticks for the best view of English Harbour, approximately 500 feet below. A steel-drum band plays ABBA's "Dancing Queen," and the scent of jerk chicken fills the air.

On my last day on island, I tackle another must-do, a snorkel at Stingray City. (Yes, it's modeled after the original on Grand Cayman.) Back at the hotel, I do the math: I've ticked off only 2 percent of the 365 beaches. Henry, my guide, has one more stop before departure. "I'll take you somewhere you surely haven't been," she says. It becomes clear that for this outing, I'm leaving my bikini on the hotel railing to dry.

Narrow lanes lead to the small community of Parham. Antigua's oldest town and once a bustling seaport, it's fronted by shallow reefs and islands that make anchoring treacherous. When Antigua became independent from British rule in 1981, nearby St. John's, with its protected natural harbor, was chosen as the capital. We park at the doorstep of St. Peter's Anglican Church.

"It's the only structure of its kind in the Caribbean," Henry tells me as

we admire the eight-sided structure with large windows, encircled with ballast stones from England.

"I see mangoes in a hat," she says. "Someone must be inside." A secret island signal revealed.

The church's towering ceiling is a beamed masterpiece so nautical in design it could only be the work of a 19th-century shipbuilder. But that's only a guess. The church's caretaker, he of the mango hat, tells us it was built in 1840, and that's all that's known.

A strong wind rises, shaking the leaves off the mango trees outside. A fierce rain unleashes a symphony on the wooden roof of the old church.

Surely the people on Antigua's 365 beaches were scattering in surprise. After all, the drought has meant far more sunny days than anyone anticipated. However, it has also forced locals to install rainwater tanks. Dominica has even offered to sell some of its abundant drinking water supply.

In that moment, as the downpour lashes the stone floors and air shoots through the arched windows, I hope the rain never stops.