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THE TAMING OF ANTIGUA

Today it's all about sailing and megayachts, but to really understand this popular yachtie island you have to look back to a time when its harbors protected a different sort of vessel.

Words - Shaw McCutcheon



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF ANTIGUA & BARBUDA TOURISM AUTHORITY (CENTER), SHAW MCCUTCHEON (TOP RIGHT)



Viewed from the air, Antigua looks like an artist's mistake, a splattered blotch on the blue canvas of the eastern Caribbean Sea. Long, crooked fingers and deep depressions reach out from the center of the blotch, forming many protected anchorages. To this day, some 522 years after Columbus' maiden cruise past this small island, it is still considered the capital of Caribbean yachting.

Certainly the British thought so. Way back in the mid-1700s, when they were planting flagpoles of possession on various West Indie islands, they needed a safe harbor from which they could guard their naval power. They found it on Antigua's south side, a cove so well-protected that when a major hurricane swept over the area, the only surviving ships had been anchored there.

Today, that harbor, aptly named English Harbour, is the site of two of the Caribbean's most important yachting events: Sailing Week, the largest of the Caribbean's sailing regattas, and the Antigua Charter Yacht Show, which brings in a couple of billion dollars' worth of megayachts.

I had come here at the tail end of this show to take in Antigua and Barbuda from the luxurious vantage point of one of the charter yachts. My ride was a 164-foot Benetti motor yacht called *JO*. For nearly a decade, *JO* has been very active, known for hosting family-oriented trips, and the 12-person crew makes a point of a relaxed, informal approach to yacht service.



WALK IT OFF
Set aside a couple of hours for the return walk to Antigua's highest point, 1,319-foot Mount Obama. Begin on its northern side, near the Mount Obama National Park monument in Christian Valley, and follow the track past a mango orchard and up through the rain forest. If conditions are clear and you can gain access to the private telecom company compound on the summit, you'll relish sweeping views over the island and toward Guadeloupe, Montserrat, Nevis and St. Kitts.



protected by an impenetrable rain forest covering its steep sides. (In 2009, the locals



renamed it Mount Obama.) Fig Tree Drive meanders through this picturesque landscape, past heavily

laden groves of fruit trees and through canyons of tropical rain forests, suddenly coming out on the azure coastline and back north to St. John's. Between two steep hillsides is a well-organized 13-cable zipline tour for those who want to cruise quickly and effortlessly through the jungle. It takes about two hours to complete the tour, and afterward you can sit in the base station bar and listen to the excited screams of others zooming down the canyon.

This island's chief tourist attraction is English Harbour and Nelson's Dockyard, adjacent to the larger Falmouth Harbour on the island's south side. On a high hill nearby is Shirley Heights, originally meant as a fortified lookout for the English force, but now a popular hangout with the best scenic view on the island. It was in English Harbour in 1725 that the British set up shop with a small garrison meant to service and guard British warships sent to the Caribbean to protect the regional colonies. In 1784, Horatio Nelson, then in his late 20s, spent three years here as the local commander. He hated the place, made enemies among local merchants for forbidding them to trade with America, and was so sick upon returning to England he stored a barrel of rum on the ship to preserve his body in case he died. The Dockyard itself has been fully restored, and it's not hard to feel transported back a couple of centuries by the heavy stonework used to build the officers' quarters and the Copper and Lumber store, now converted into a small historical inn.

Despite the pessimistic forecasts, the day I boarded *JO* in Falmouth Harbour the sun shown bright and an easterly breeze stiffened the yacht's stern flag. Our captain, Ian Robertson (one of two rotating captains), a genial Brit who runs marathons and enjoys kitesurfing, took us a half-hour west to Carlisle Bay.

(named after Codrington's daughter, and what she hoped for is lost in history), has been restored as a museum about the industry.

In the center of the island is a monument to Antigua's passion for cricket: the 20,000-seat Sir Vivian Richards Stadium, built in part with a huge donation from China. Cricket is to the Antiguans what soccer is to the Brazilians, and during the January-to-July season the country turns cricket-mad. Richards, a native Antiguan who is ranked as one of the all-time great batsmen, is celebrated each year on Heroes Day, a national holiday honoring the five greatest Antiguans in history, Richards being the only one still living.

Elsewhere around the island, Antiguans have found many ways to take advantage of the Caribbean geography to entertain visitors. On the Atlantic side, some entrepreneurs have turned a waist-high stretch of sand into Stingray City for the mutual benefit of both tourists and the spoiled-rotten fish.

Much of the island consists of thickly forested, gently rolling hills, except on the southwest side, where Antigua's version of a mountain range is found. The highest point, the 1,319-foot Boggy Peak, is

JO is ideal for the Caribbean, chock-full of personal watercraft, kayaks, paddleboards, a couple of tenders, inflatable floatables, snorkel gear and a two-story waterslide. On sunny days, the yacht becomes a virtual playground; the crew even allows guests to swing out over the water from the boat's tender crane.

Sun didn't seem to be in the cards for my trip, though. Forecasts called for rough sea conditions and possible rain showers. And weather is, of course, the one uncontrollable variable for any charter; a yacht must be prepared to adapt.

In the face of bad weather, *JO* acquires an alternate incarnation, as a super-luxurious hotel featuring five-star meals under the canopied aft deck, games and movies inside and as a concierge for on-shore activities. Here, Antigua's hilly geography, its 365 white, pristine beaches and its commercially inspired tribute to its English history provide plenty of options when watersports aren't available.

The island's British heritage is on display everywhere you turn, from the left-side driving to the Anglican names, Jolly Harbour, Harmony Hall, the capital St. John's; from the top tourist attraction, English Harbour and Nelson's Dockyard, to the country's obvious addiction to cricket. It's not a big place; it's nearly impossible to get lost, as it takes only an hour to drive completely across the 14- by 11-mile island and locals are only too helpful in telling you to make a simple U-turn at the water's edge to find your way back.

It was first colonized by the English back in the late 1600s when a man named Codrington came looking for a place to grow sugarcane. And while tourism long ago replaced sugar as Antigua's major moneymaker, one can still see evidence of Codrington's work here and there: crumbling stone windmills (there were more than 150 of them at one point), the countryside full of vacant fields that once grew cane, the remains of a fire-damaged processing plant. The island's first large sugar plantation, Betty's Hope



Carlisle Bay Resort

Betty's Hope



SIP SUNDOWNERS

Bury your toes in the sand as you sip a Coconut Grove (English Harbour white rum, lime and coconut cream) at Carlisle Bay Resort's Jetty Bar. Sunset drinks are served around a fire pit, made from an old "copper" that was once used to boil cane juice. carlisle-bay.com

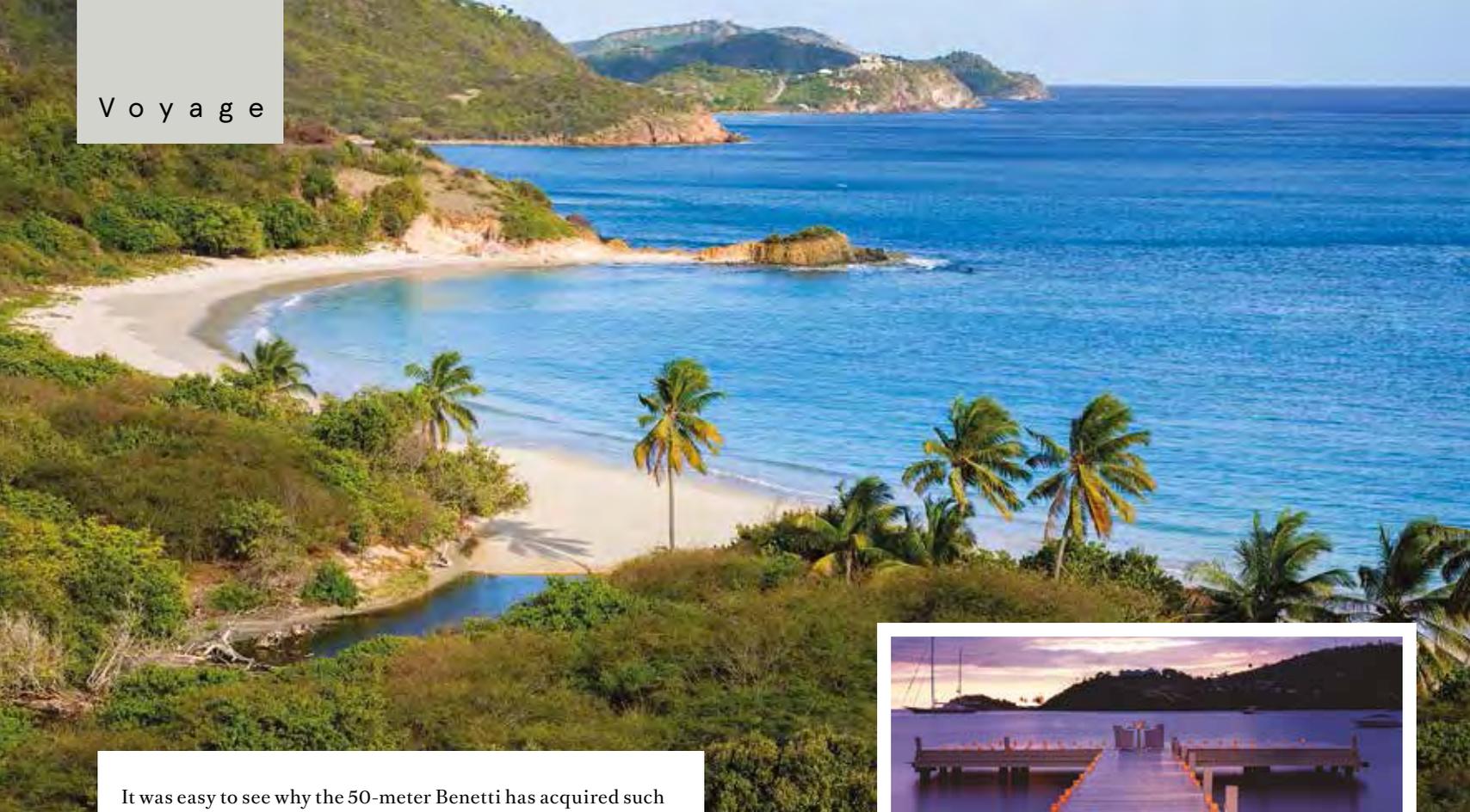


Nelson's Dockyard

PHOTOGRAPHS: OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF ANTIGUA & BARBUDA TOURISM AUTHORITY (TOP, CENTER INSET AND BOTTOM); ROSEWOOD HOTELS & RESORTS (RIGHT INSET); THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF ANTIGUA & BARBUDA TOURISM AUTHORITY (TOP, BOTTOM INSET); CARLISLE BAY (TOP INSET); SHAW MCCUTCHEON (BOTTOM)



Falmouth Harbour

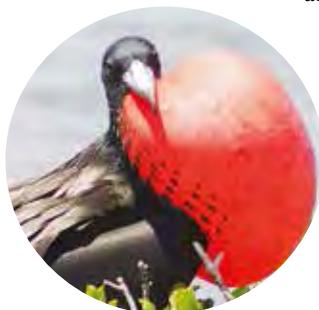


It was easy to see why the 50-meter Benetti has acquired such a family-friendly reputation. The sun deck features a large Jacuzzi and an enormous sunpad surrounded on four sides by a waist-high, glassed-in railing, a safe spot for the kids.

As the sun settled on the western horizon, the Resort at Carlisle Bay, one of Antigua's best hotels, glowed warmly on the shoreline against the steep, verdant hills behind it. Dinner that evening, prepared by the yacht's chef, featured a succulent veal dressed in a delicious piccata sauce, which sloshed quietly in our plates as the boat answered to the passing swells underneath.

Our next destination was Antigua's sister island, Barbuda, about a four-hour cruise to the north. Barbuda is an anomaly in this largely volcanic part of the world. Unlike most of the mountainous Leewards, Barbuda is a flat, sandy limestone island, famous mainly for a resort that once hosted publicity-averse celebrities and as a wintertime destination for vacationing frigate birds from the Galapagos. It has been politically linked to Antigua since the 1600s, when the Codrington family leased the island for an annual fee of one fattened sheep. It later became a breeding ground for Antigua-bound slaves, and local residents found the surrounding reefs a rich source of income from at least 160 ships that collided with the sea bottom there.

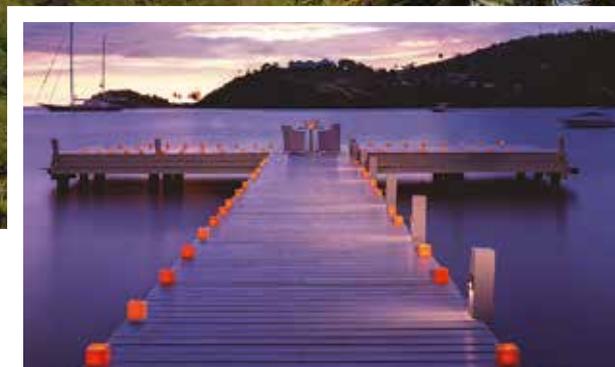
At dawn the next day, we weighed anchor and headed around the west side of Antigua. The seas were a moderate three to six feet and the wind had picked up to a steady 15 knots, which the Benetti handled easily. By mid-morning, we were anchored in calm water a half-mile off Barbuda's Princess Diana Beach, a three-mile-long, sandy beach the islanders named in her honor



after she spent a few vacations as a guest at the very private (and now defunct) K Club Resort. The crew lowered a tender and we headed ashore; a van was waiting to take us to Codrington Lagoon, where a local water taxi would continue our journey to the frigate bird sanctuary.

The population of Barbuda is just under 2,000. It's a place where everyone knows everyone else and the soft sounds of the constant sea breeze and the surf are broken only occasionally by the rumble of a passing auto. Alongside the island's single paved road half-built homes lay waiting for their owners to get enough cash together to finish the job (it often takes years). Although there are rumors that K Club is being renovated, the island's only functioning resort today is the super-exclusive Lighthouse Point Resort a mile farther down the same beach.

At the west end of Codrington Lagoon were the frigate birds, hundreds of them, all crowded on the tops of thick mangrove bushes. The males sit there and blow up red balloon-like throat pouches to make themselves look as sexy as possible. They're huge birds with wingspans surpassing seven feet; they don't swim, they steal food from other birds and can stay in the air up to 12 days without a break. We drifted quietly next to the mangroves, sometimes getting within an arm's length of the nesting birds, listening to them whistle and drum their throats in a concerto of mating sounds.



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF ANTIGUA & BARBUDA TOURISM AUTHORITY (TOP, CIRCLE), COURTESY OF CARLISLE BAY (INSET)



Back on the yacht, meanwhile, the crew prepared a magnificent dinnertime picnic ashore, hauling tables, chairs, a large tent, an industrial-sized barbecue and fluted stemware for an elaborate repast of steak and lobsters. While they set up the beach event, we spent the afternoon careening down the waterslide and swinging wildly from the extended tender crane. We waited until the island's voracious mosquitoes finished their sunset meal before heading ashore in total darkness for ours.

The next day, we returned to the more bustling of the two islands, finding a placid anchorage in reef-protected Nonsuch Bay on Antigua's eastern edge. I found my way to a chaise lounge on the flybridge while others soaked in the Jacuzzi. Somebody brought me a mojito as I watched a couple of Jet Skis zoom by and a kitesurfing school teach newbies how to catch the wind. My thoughts turned to Devil's Bridge on the north side of Nonsuch Bay, the extreme eastern point of Antigua. On the hundreds of pure, gently sloping beaches all over the island, the sea emerges victorious, pulverizing hard rock, corals and shells to tiny specks. But rock wins at Devil's Bridge, a high vertical wall, against which the crashing Atlantic surf explodes with dramatic ferocity.

Legend has it that desperate slaves used to jump off the wall. Whether or not it's true, Devil's Bridge remains a cogent reminder that the battle between sea and land is constant.

In a similar way, Antigua's complex history, first as an angry center of slavery for the sugar producers, then a military outpost against pirates and international competition and finally a quiet, easygoing refuge for tourists, is a reminder that time, like the sea, softens everything. ■



Charter JO
 Contact: Jamie Wallace
 t: (954) 524-4250
 w: camperandnicholsons.com

ISLAND TIME



Tee up

Grab your clubs and head up to the par-70 Cedar Valley Golf Course, an 18-hole championship course in the island's north.

Designed and built by Ralph Aldridge, Cedar Valley opened with nine holes in 1970. Today, it rewards players with hill and sea views, a 300-yard driving range and optional lessons with former professional golfer R. Paul Michael. cvgolfantigua.com



Spa-ahh time

Let your cares drift away at Sense, a Rosewood Spa at Jumby Bay Resort. Spa experiences here embrace indigenous healing traditions, and treatments integrate native ingredients grown at the resort. The Neem tree, for example, has provided health benefits to native people for thousands of years and is used in the spa's signature facial, as well as its after-sun treatment. rosewoodhotels.com/en/jumby-bay-antigua



Stay ashore

If you're opting for a land-based visit, 300-acre Jumby Bay, a private island two miles from Antigua, is an enticing choice. This Rosewood Resort features 40 rooms, suites and expansive villas, each within a few paces of the beach, as well as five dining options, including the Estate House, a circa-1830 colonial house with a weekly rum tasting. rosewoodhotels.com/en/jumby-bay-antigua

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF ANTIGUA & BARBUDA TOURISM AUTHORITY (TOP), SHAW MCCUTCHEON (CENTER AND BOTTOM)