

lifestyletravel

ANTIGUAN IMPRESSIONS

Modern pleasures, troubled past

BY JORGE ARANGO

Antigua is beautiful. Antigua is too beautiful. Sometimes the beauty of it seems unreal...as if it were stage sets for a play, for no real sunset could look like that; no real seawater could strike that many shades of blue at once; no real sky could be that shade of blue...and no cloud could be that white and float just that way in that blue sky; no real day could be that sort of sunny and bright, making everything seem transparent and shallow; and no real night could be that sort of black, making everything seem thick and deep and bottomless.

—Jamaica Kincaid, from *A Small Place* (Penguin)

Antiguans don't rush to embrace Kincaid as their native daughter. Not surprising, as *A Small Place* was an extended rant against the mentality of her countrymen. Yet the history of this 14-by-17-mile island is the history of the whole of the Caribbean. Whatever country you travel to in these parts has, in greater or smaller measure, painful connections to slavery, colonialism and thoughtless human intervention in the natural landscape. It is the Caribbean Condition. Our

choice is whether to seek only pleasure or deepen our experience with knowledge of Antigua's past.

It's hard to deny that it is precisely the air of unreality that draws people to this Edenic isle. Kincaid's frustrations notwithstanding (and things change—the book was written almost 15 years ago), it hasn't ceased to lure the likes of Spike Lee, Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston and other celebrities. They do not come here, one suspects, to get a lesson on the legacy of colonialism.

Where It's Wet Antiguans say there are 365 beaches here—conveniently for marketing purposes, one for each day of the year. But who cares if there are actually only 359 or 272? How many strips of white sand and glistening turquoise water could you really explore in an average vacation?

One of the most pristine is at Jolly Harbour Villas, a 500-acre family resort that its general manager describes as “the Little Venice of the Caribbean” (he's planning water taxis to ferry guests around). If only Venice's waters had the clarity and reflective properties of the tranquil [CONTINUED ON PAGE 218]

Yachts moored in the protected inlet waters of English Harbour, located on Antigua's southern coast.



Jolly Beach! In more than 30 years of living and traveling in the Caribbean, I have never seen such an impossibly luminescent blue—like staring through the surface of a giant aquamarine gemstone to scattered patches of emeralds and sapphires underneath.

Yet the greatest virtue of Antigua's beaches lies in their democracy. Unlike private resort beaches on many of the other islands, everyone has equal access to the entire seashore of Antigua, whether you are peddler or poet, boat builder or billionaire.

What Came Before Antigua was named by Columbus after a church in Seville, Spain. In 1632 it was colonized by the British, who set up a thriving sugarcane industry that gradually petered out after the abolition of slavery in 1834. Full independence came in 1981. Today it is a two-island nation (Barbuda is its companion) and retains a parliamentary form of government that is, to people like Kincaid, an infuriatingly European holdover.

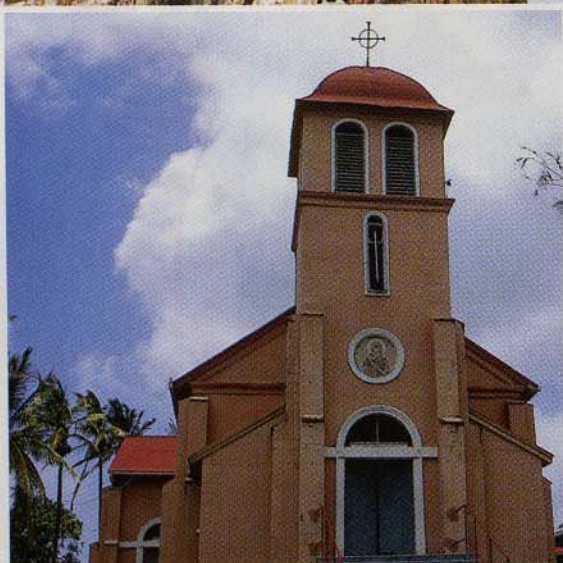
The European past is apparent in Antigua's capital, St. John's. In the Redcliffe Quay section, old colonial stone buildings have been converted into cafés and shops that sell everything from the most precious jewelry (at The Goldsmithy) to resort wear (Splash) and local crafts. The Heritage Quay section, of more modern construction, boasts duty-free boutiques like Benetton. These sit cheek by jowl with ragtag stalls and lean-tos selling quotidian commodities such as soap alongside colorful island paintings and kitschy merchandise like red-yellow-green Rasta hats with synthetic dreadlocks attached.

But to me, the most poignant evidence of how completely Europeans commandeered the island lies in the way they affected the vegetation. Again, Jamaica Kincaid, this time from *My Garden (Book)* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux):

What did the botanical life of Antigua consist of at the time... Christopher Columbus first saw it? To see a garden in Antigua now will not supply a clue. The bougainvillea... is native to tropical South America; the plumbago is from southern Africa; the croton is from Malaysia; the hibiscus is from Asia (unfringed petal) and East Africa (fringed petal); the allamanda is from Brazil; the poinsettia... is from Mexico; the bird of paradise is from southern Africa; the Bermuda lily is from Japan; the flamboyant tree is from Madagascar; the casuarina comes from Australia; the Norfolk pine comes from Norfolk Island in the South Pacific; the tamarind tree is from Africa and Asia.

More beauty; more unreality.

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Top to bottom: A beach vendor; stone columns—remnants of a colonial past at English Harbour; Lady of the Valley Church, located at the point where three villages meet.

The Gathering All of Antigua society is assembled to commemorate the reopening of the exclusive Galley Bay Resort, a luxe Polynesian-style village on a strip of land between an indigenous bird sanctuary and the sea.

The crowd is a mix of Blacks, Anglos and Middle Easterners, of government officials, merchants and moguls. There is the prime minister, Honorable Lester Bryant Bird, a massive physical presence into whose enormous hand your own disappears when he greets you. This is a man, a Jamaican guest tells me, whose macho pride forbade him from admitting that he fainted at the 1997 funeral of Michael Manley—one of the most revered prime ministers of Jamaica. Bird is imposing yet warm, his face opening wide as he addresses us. “Our people,” he says, “smile not only on the outside but from the inside as well.” For the most part, he does not hyperbolize.

There is Noreen Phillips, the elegant proprietor of a namesake dress shop that guarantees delivery of custom haute couture garments within two hours of the taking of measurements. Her smooth espresso skin is set off by a strapless apricot silk-chiffon gown. Trailing behind her is a matching scarf—and her husband, Robert Lesser, a wrinkled little White man dressed in an outdated seersucker jacket and white shoes who introduces himself, incongruously, as “her better half.”

And there is Rob Barrett, a hotel impresario who reminds me of Hemingway, Hunter S. Thompson and other characters who fished and drank and brawled their way through the Caribbean in the forties and fifties.


There are surely hidden dramas and hostilities here only insiders could divine. But it seems unfair to characterize this assembly with Kincaid’s degree of passionate cynicism. Colonialism is a Caribbean fact, as inescapable here as in the Virgin Islands or Puerto Rico, and still we come to windsurf and tan. Anger like Kincaid’s is understandable. Her voice, though shrill, can deepen our appreciation and enrich our experience of Antigua. And, in the end, even she must admit the difficulty of resisting its charms.

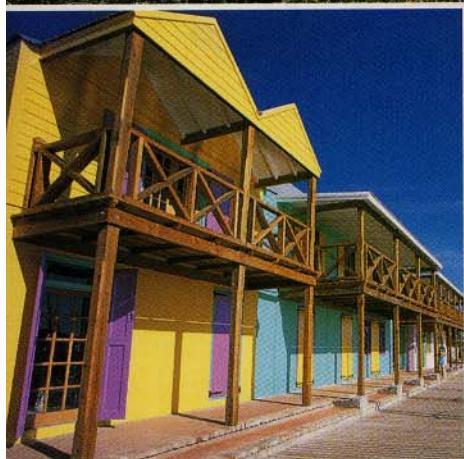
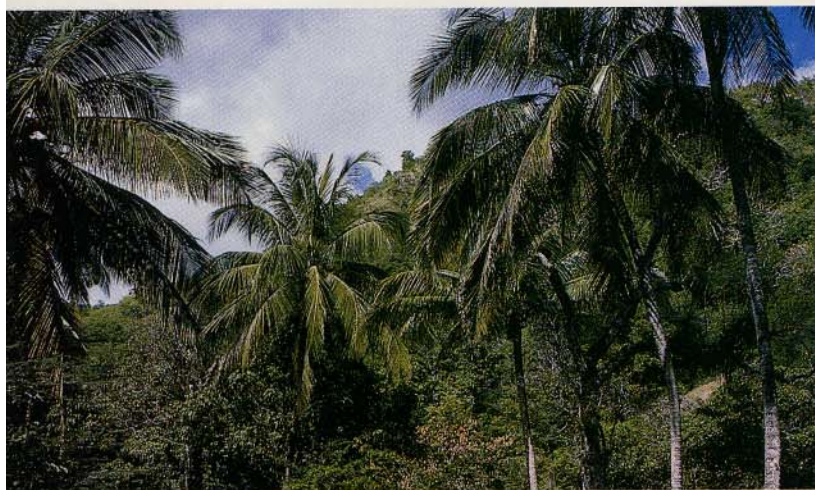
WHERE TO STAY

Antigua Resorts owns several properties, any of which can be booked by calling (800) 858-4618. Daily rates for the off-season (generally mid-April to mid-December) are based on European Plan double-occupancy: **St. James Club**, about \$250; **Jolly Harbour Villas**, about \$135; **Royal Antigua**,

about \$150. **Galley Bay Resort** offers only all-inclusive programs for about \$550 per night (children under 16 not allowed).

Daily all-inclusive rates at **Jolly Beach Resort**, the island’s only major Black-owned hotel, are about \$180 to \$360, (800) 223-9815.

TWA and BWIA International fly direct (from New York); most others change in Miami or San Juan. 



Clockwise from top: Lush views along Fig Tree Drive; at play on one of the beaches, which are accessible to all, residents and visitors alike; shops on Heritage Quay.

