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A HOLIDAY
IN THE
MALDIVES

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

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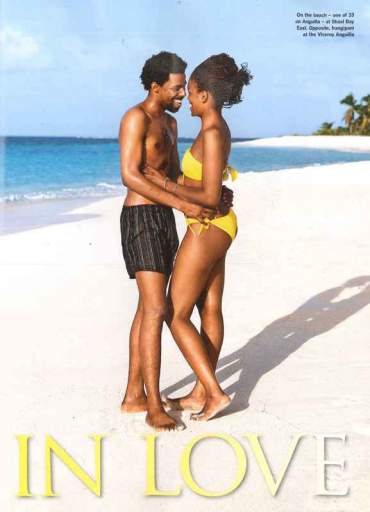
Romantic breaks

Where to take
your Valentine



Europe's best villas

On the beach - one of 33
on Anguilla - at Shoal Bay
East. Opposite, Trangpam
at the Viceroy Anguilla



IN LOVE



Clockwise from top left: Uta Gamba, owner of Snobay's at the Cove; Uncle Ernie's beach bar in Shoal Bay East; John's and The Pumphouse in Sandy Ground. Opposite, a guest at Cap Juluca



D

AWN ON MALDEN'S BAY feels like the beginning of time. Wind-tossed palm fronds Cassandra arris as a line of brown pelicans, oddly prehistoric-looking with their bulky bodies and long, isosceles beaks, beat their way, like a slow handclap, across the horizon. It's a curiously savage scene and it only lasts until the light changes. By 10am, the Caribbean cliché is in place: the surf is doing its relaxation-tape thing, the gold-dust sand shimmerers and the sea is laid out like a hotel-room Rothko, in strictly ordered bands of blue from indigo to palest opal.

The Caribbean is not short of spectacular beaches, but Anguilla, the northernmost island of the Leeward chain, is spectacular with the contrast turned up. Anguilla is, in fact, mainly beach, a long, sinuous landmass barely breaking the surface of the ocean. Seventeen miles from end to end and just three miles across at its widest, it streaks across the water like the red it was named for. Its earliest inhabitants, the Arawak Indians, made their way here in 2000bc, travelling in dugout canoes from the Orinoco delta. Today, visitors arrive either by boat from neighbouring St Martin or at the tiny Wallblake

landing strip, where goats graze the airfield. Yet something of the island's outpost identity persists.

Carefully managed tourism (and generous offshore-banking legislation) has turned Anguilla into the Caribbean's most exclusive destination. Private jets drop a discreet daily cargo of celebrity: Naomi Campbell, Paris Hilton, Deseal Washington and Bill Clinton are said to be regular visitors. With no berth deep enough for cruise liners, Anguilla is at pains to maintain its small-scale, 'community' vibe. There are no casinos on the island, no nightclubs and next to no shopping opportunities (though I like to think of Naomi and her size-zero pals flipping through the rails at the island's 'Thick Mastan' plus-size emporium). This is glamour without the glitz, St Barts without the paparazzi.

"People come to Anguilla for three things: the beaches, the restaurants and the people. You can rearrange those in whatever order has meaning for you," says Uta Gamba, an imposing figure with a rich, jazz queen's voice and electric-blue fingernails. You won't go far on the island before making the acquaintance of the fabulously connected Mrs Gamba. Her father, Jeremiah, steered

ANGUILLA IS SMALL-SCALE AND EXCLUSIVE: GLAMOUR WITHOUT THE GLITZ, ST BARTS WITHOUT THE PAPARAZZI



A wide-angle photograph of a tropical beach. The foreground shows light-colored sand with gentle waves washing onto it. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, extending to a clear horizon line. The sky is a deep blue, filled with large, fluffy white cumulus clouds. The overall atmosphere is bright and serene.

IT'S QUITE POSSIBLE TO MIND YOURSELF THE ONLY PERSON

A view from the beach
of Shoal Bay East

the island through the difficult days of its separation from the neighbouring St Kitts government in the 1960s (it is now a separate British overseas territory). And it was the visionary Mr Gumbs who realised the island's potential for tourism.

'When he opened up the first guesthouse, they told him he was mad,' says his daughter, who presides, in some state, at Smokey's, a convivial beach bar where tables, weighted with saffron-scented garribo and deep-fried sweet-potato strings, sink slowly into the sand until you find yourself eating Japanese-style. 'The island was nothing but a hump of limestone.' Una goes on. 'Why would anyone want to visit? But my father had lived long enough in the USA to know that people would come for what Anguilla does best. It didn't have crime or crowds or unemployment. It still doesn't. That's why the people who do come here keep coming back.'

— A dozen bridge players — bridge and boat-bridging are the twin passions of Anguillians — that makes us to make up a

four at the afternoon's tournament, but I suspect we're not nearly up to her game. And those beaches are calling.

EUROPEAN MINDS are unadapted to the notion of beaches that have it all. We're used to the eternal trade-off between good sand and good swimming, and we know in our hearts that any beach that doesn't require advanced absiding skills to reach it will be jammed with grilling bodies before we get there. Which makes the Anguilla experience all the more brain-rattling. The month of May, Koolhaas-core-bright with bouganvillea and the aptly named 'fervidervant' shrub that grows in such abundance in shoreline gardens is the last hurrah of the holiday period here — a cooling breeze hints at the hurricane season ahead — and it is quite possible to find yourself the only person on any one of Anguilla's 33 picture-perfect coves and beaches. Except, perhaps, for Shoal Bay East, which passes for the island's hot spot — a science of pencil-pointed beach bars

ON ANY ONE OF THE ISLAND'S PICTURE-PERFECT COVES



The beach at Cap Juluca, on the island's south-west coast. Right, relaxing in the garden of one of the resort's villas. Below, the tented reception area



popular with city boys from New York (*Forbes* magazine is the beach read of choice) and pre-wedding parties of girls in full slap and bare feet (Anguilla is a popular wedding island, and spontaneous types need only 48 hours in the country to qualify for a licence). Cocktails at The Wheel of Fortune deserve serious attention; you'll need a spoon for the Mango Baileys Bonanza, a drink so densely and daringly calorific that you rather wonder they didn't top it off with a fried egg.

There's a gentler scene over the hill, on Crocus Bay (well worth a detour for the lime-and-coconut-crusted pavans at Da' Vida restaurant). And if one footprint on the beach is a footprint too many, a boatman docks under a banyan tree waiting to putter you round to Little Bay, a deserted cove and marine preserve offering some of the island's best snorkelling. Sandy Ground, with its beach cafes and gently shelving sands, is ideal for family swimming and comes (quite slowly) alive at night, when musicians pick up the island beat of ska and reggae. Round on Rendezvous Bay is Dane Preserve. This beach bar, built from a huddle of old boat hulls and driftwood, is a modest shrine to Bankie Barr, the reggae pioneer who is Anguilla's most

despairing of profit, packed up and left the Anguillians, day-poor but free, to hark a living from the rock.

In a modest, two-room bungalow at the east end of the island, the story of this struggle for survival is laid out meticulously on picture-panels and coffee tables. Among catalogued fossils, fees and loans, advertisements for slave sales ('Cash! Highest Price for Men, Women and Children!') bear brutal witness alongside poker-worked proverbs ('Saw-necked people end up with a broken neck') and the dried triggerfish traditionally used by islanders to scrub out pots and pans. The Heritage Collection Museum is the life's work of Colville Petty, a local historian who has made a remarkable archive out of his family home. His best reward is the busload of schoolchildren who breeze through the museum, bursting with questions.

'It's important for the children to learn about their history,' says Petty, a gentle, scholarly man with a prophet's beard.

'They need to know the hardships and sufferings their forebears

endured to ensure that today's Anguillians would have a place they could call home.'

The suffering didn't stop with slavery. Until the 1950s, Anguilla's only export was salt, and salt-reaping was notoriously hard labour, effectively cooking the limbs of gaspser in boiling mud. It is easy to see why Anguillians are keen to maximise the potential of their golden sands. 'Twenty years ago,' says Petty, 'most young Anguillians would either emigrate or work half the year in the Dominican Republic. Now school-leavers have a future in their own country.'

Certainly the welcome, both on and off the gated resorts, is frank and friendly. You'll need a hire-car to get about - there are no local buses, and taxi fares are hilariously high - but, unlike some other Caribbean destinations, Anguilla has no concept of 'no-go' zones for visitors. No, in truth, is there much to explore beyond the beaches, though there is a strip of commercial enterprises along the central spine of the island, known as The Valley. It's a curious

A PRODUCTIVE MORNING MIGHT BE SPENT SWIMMING OUT TO SEE IF THAT HUMPED SHAPE REALLY IS A TURTLE



Clockwise from right: pool service at the Vicory Anguilla; a coconut-seller by the roadside; chef Daniel Le Guisan in the Cuisin'Art greenhouse; on Sully Cay. Opposite, snorkelling close to shore



line-up, with liquor stores jammed up against diamond dealers, and a banner strung across the Department of Agriculture exhorting islanders to "Farm Today or Starve Tomorrow".

On Friday nights, the island's main highway is lined with 'pop-up' grills and snack vans serving aromatic goat curries and steaming chowders. Extended families gather round trestle tables at crossroads, and grandmothers clip the ear of whichever child is nearest *pour encourager les autres*. At Hungry's, a psychedelically decorated trailer serving fragrant conch soup by the paillif, a sign hanging in a tree respectfully reminds patrons that it is an offence to urinate in public. And if the boys in singlets and gold chains waiting in line are disappointed to find a *bona fide* Britisher with zero knowledge of cricket, they're too polite to push it.

FOOD IS THE CORNERSTONE of Anguillian life. The queue stretching to the end of time at Hungry's is partly explained by glowing reviews published in international gourmet magazines. In recent years, the island has been the haunt of foodies who are drawn by a staggering

choice of restaurants, ranging from roadside vans to the full, napkin-flapping, cloche-flourishing Monty. And if Anguilla is a foodies' Mecca, the Holy of Holies has to be Malliouhana Hotel & Spa.

Ian Fleming would have loved this swallow's-nest hotel, high on a limestone bluff above foaming Atlantic breakers. There's a kind of establishment expat glamour to the walnut-and-rattan decor, the jingly gardens and the breeze-funnelling interiors with blasts of hot exotism on the walls (the British owners, Leon and Nigel Roydon, have been adding to their collection of original Haitian art since the hotel opened in 1984).

The rooms and suites at Malliouhana are luxurious in an easy, unshowy way; you could believe yourself in the comfy guest bedroom of a friend. Staff in crisp, striped shirts and chinos could be weekendling stockbrokers, and there is a marked lack of fussing, though a generous staff-to-guest ratio does allow for some gratifyingly grown-up touches. Enquire idly, for example, about a particular blossom in the garden and



In the manicured grounds
of the Victoria Anguilla