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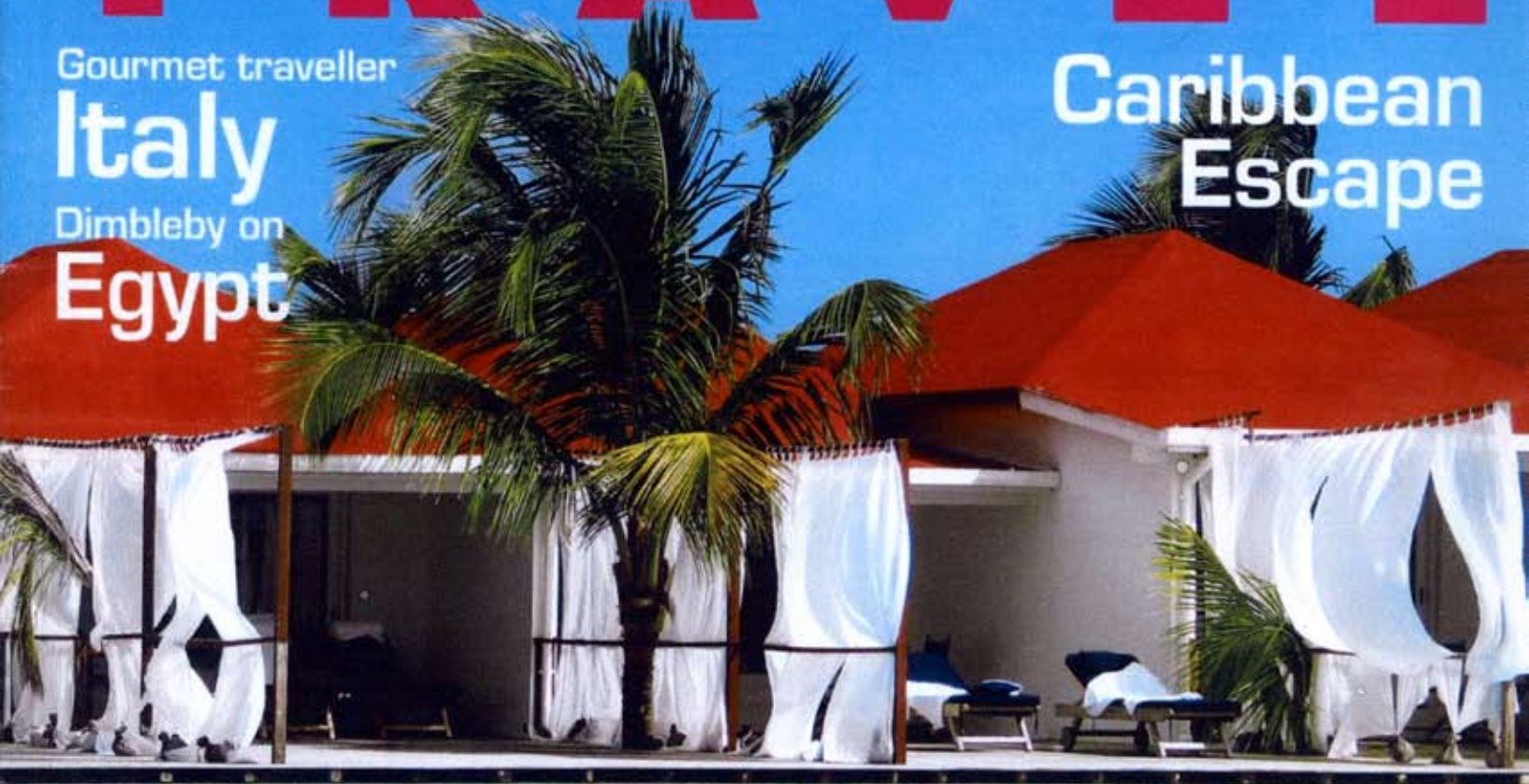
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Far from the maddening crowd

Everyone loves the warm sands, blue seas and dazzling sunsets of the Caribbean. But if you want to experience these pleasures in peace and solitude, where can you go? Try an unassuming little island in the shadow of Antigua

Words by Silvi Koppel Photographs by Jess Koppel

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO AT THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL IS DINE, RELAX AND SOAK UP THE SUN



‘Do you mean Bermuda or Barbados?’ asks yet another friend as my sister and I describe our holiday plans. ‘Neither,’ we reiterate. ‘We’re going to Barbuda. Next door to Antigua. Tiny island. Miles of beaches.’ And, to be honest, that’s all we know about it. We have arrived at our choice more by knowing what we don’t want, than what we do. No beaches cluttered with conch-shell blowers or cigarette stubs; no karaoke nights; no sporty experiences and no midges. Our destination lacks all the right things. What swings the decision is not just the fact that Barbuda has acres of sand, but that the sand is pink. ‘Surely you mean white, or black?’ asks the friend. ‘It’s pink,’ we insist. ‘It’s pink sand and it’s in Barbuda. OK?’

We fly from Gatwick to Antigua, and are checked on to a Carib Air flight with the other five passengers for the 20-minute flight to Barbuda. Our luggage disappears on the heads of several Antiguanus who appear, seemingly, at random and estimate its weight by poking at each bag with the point of a shoe. After a bumpy but mercifully brief flight, we sort through our luggage on the tarmac and pass through customs, which is located in what appears to be the island’s only bus shelter, along with arrivals and departures.

The K Club is Barbuda’s original luxury hideaway. The K stands for

Italian fashion designer Krizia and it was one of Princess Di’s hideaways, but it is in need of a little renovation and has definitely ceded its crown to our destination, the Beach House Hotel.

We arrive at the Beach House in the early evening, to be greeted by our own ‘ambassador’ who offers each guest a 30-minute massage. We’ve been given a mobile phone to contact our ambassador, any time. Service is delivered by cheerful, white-linen-clad staff, with all the poise, charm and coyness of infant-school children who have spent a term rehearsing for a special visitor. This belies their professionalism and perfect level of attentiveness. Our only gripe is the absence of a fridge. We are offered lots of other gadgets: a safe, hairdryer, portable DVD player, air-conditioning. There is a full-sized pool table and a laptop for guests to check their stocks and shares or to see how much rain is falling at home, but nothing in which to keep our lipsticks chilled.

Our rooms face the sea, viewed through sliding glass doors that open on to a private decked stoop with our own salt-water pool. The rooms are lovely, lots of space, lots of white. The Beach House Hotel is arranged around a central white roofed wooden deck that houses the lounge, bar and dining area. This —————>



open space is filled with simple white sofas and coffee tables cut from the same dark wood as the floor. The simple white and natural wood design is the same throughout the hotel, giving it a natural and minimal feeling that contrasts beautifully with the startlingly blue pool and sea beyond.

Our days fall into a routine of sorts. We walk along the deserted beach in the morning, take a lap swim in the pool, lie about on loungers on the stoop or by the pool and read, eat and play backgammon. There was nothing to trouble us except the sandflies, which were in abundance thanks to recent, unusually high rainfall.

The food is cooked by a melancholic Italian called Andrea who adapts the traditional cooking of his home country to incorporate locally available produce, especially seafood. The menu includes tagliatelle with fish ragu, crab ravioli, perfectly seasoned with fragrant herbs, and imaginatively flavoured ice-creams such as broccoli and avocado. We ask Andrea to cook the fish we 'caught' – three, inch-long, silvery corpses that we found washed up on the beach. He gets the joke and it is the first and last time I see him smile. Sadly, no local dishes such as curried goat, jerk chicken, rice and beans are available, but the 'all day' menu of salads and sandwiches lives up to its name and there is a constant supply of fresh juices and cocktails.

One afternoon I couldn't resist a cocktail of crushed ice, banana, Bailey's, coconut cream and rum. The effect would have satisfied any anaesthetist with a patient undergoing open-heart surgery. I lay down and was unrousable for supper, apparently responding

crossly to my sister asking what I had said, with 'I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to someone in my dream'. Thirteen hours later I woke to see the sun in the sky.

The sea along the beach within an hour's walk of the hotel in either direction is rough with awkward waves and unsuitable for swimming, so we hire a vehicle for a day to drive to Access beach. Our ambassador arranges a supply of large white towels, an icebox, water bottles and a platter of sliced fresh fruit. The beach is silky with pale sand, the sea turquoise, the breakers no higher than centimetres, and two pelicans are acting as self-appointed beach guards. On the way back we take the opportunity to stop off in the only town, Codrington, named after an influential British family who owned sugar plantations on the island, but nothing much seems to be happening.

Barbuda is not a resort for party animals, sensation-seekers or those hoping to be actively diverted. It is low and flat and inhabited chiefly by turtles, goats, donkeys, wild horses and the Caribbean's largest colony of frigate birds. The roads are slick with wet mud and are better suited to the donkeys that roam them. Some locals adopt wild donkeys and ponies that inhabit the island, and it turns out that our ambassador makes her pet pony available to guests. Suffice to say, that this is not the UK pony-club experience.

But the island is quiet, peaceful and relaxing, and wave-watching is one of the more demanding occupations. For those who enjoy good food, resting, swimming, walking, shell-gazing, sun and sea, this really is an ideal location.

The beach is silky with pale sand, the sea turquoise, the breakers no higher than centimetres, and two pelicans are acting as self-appointed beach guards



IN THE PINK, WHITE AND BLUE: GUESTS STEP STRAIGHT OUT OF THE HOTEL ON TO VAST EMPTY SAND BEACHES FORMED BY BILLIONS OF SHELLS



No beaches cluttered with conch-shell blowers or cigarette stubs, no karaoke nights, no sporty experiences – our destination lacks all the right things

Travel information

Currency is the Eastern Caribbean Dollar, £1=EC\$4.77.

Antigua and Barbuda are four hours behind GMT.

Barbuda's tropical climate means that it is hot all year round. The best time to go is from mid-December to mid-April when the heat is tempered by the cool trade winds and the rainfall is low. The hurricane season runs from June through to October. The heat and humidity are particularly oppressive in September and October.

No visa is required for UK travellers.

No vaccinations or malaria tablets are required.

Resources

Department of Tourism for Antigua and Barbuda has a website with information and maps of Barbuda antigua-barbuda.org.

The High Commission for Antigua and Barbuda, 2nd floor, 45 Crawford Place, London W1 (020 7258 0070; antigua-barbuda.com) is another good general source of information.

The Mini Rough Guide to Antigua & Barbuda (Rough Guides, £5.99). Pocket-sized handbook with reviews of accommodation, eating and drinking and attractions, plus expert advice on activities.

Insight Compact Guide to Antigua and Barbuda (Insight Guides, £5.99). Provides practical information in a compact format, making it ideal for on-the-spot use.

Getting there

British Airways (0870 850 9850; ba.com) flies to Antigua daily, except Monday and Friday, from £428 return.

Carib Aviation operates scheduled flights from Antigua to Barbuda, from £40 return. For tickets call ITG Marketing (01895 450710).

Where to stay

The Beach House Hotel (00 1 631 537 1352; caribbeanclubs.net/thebeachhouse) costs from US\$561 (£320) per night including breakfast and dinner. Tours are not included and cost from US\$90.

The K Club (00 1 268 460 0304; kclubbarbuda.com). Another Italian designed luxury resort, this was one of Princess Di's refuges from the paparazzi. From £393 per night for two including meals.

Where to eat

Eda's Joint, Eda's Mall, Codrington (00 1 268 460 0412). Good for authentic and inexpensive local Barbudan food.

Otherwise most of the good restaurants are at the resorts, which tend to serve Mediterranean style food, such as fresh tagliatelle with a Caribbean fish sauce for US\$20 or catch of the day for \$30.

Don't miss

Wa'Omoni Beach Park, where you can snorkel for lobster or take a boat trip to visit the famous frigate birds that nest in the mangrove fringes of Codrington Lagoon.

The beaches, particularly those north of Palmetto Point which border the lagoon on one side and the Caribbean on the other. These are best if you want to swim.

Darby Hole and Dark Cave, in the north of the island.





ALTHOUGH LOCAL PRODUCE IS NOT A BIG FEATURE OF THE MENU AT THE BEACH HOUSE, THE ITALIAN-INSPIRED FOOD INCLUDES FISH DISHES AND IMAGINATIVELY FLAVOURED ICE-CREAM

