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Make a winter escape to the real Caribbean: Anguilla



Meads Bay on Anguilla's West End has one of the island's top beaches and is fringed by resorts and restaurants.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Colville Petty opened the Heritage Collection Museum in his boyhood home to give island visitors a sense of Anguilla's history.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

Sick of winter yet? I was before I packed up my holiday decorations.

Last year's polar vortex -- and the ice dam that caused my ceiling to collapse -- did me in, so I vowed to get away this year. Some place warm, some place in the Caribbean.

But not where gargantuan cruise ships disgorge thousands of passengers to jam the sidewalks and choke the roads. And spare me the glitzy shopping plazas with their hollow promises of duty-free bargains. Forget noisy nightclubs and casinos. Give me good food with a Caribbean flair; I don't care to visit the Colonel or sit under the Golden Arches.

The tiny island of Anguilla met my demands for peace and quiet. Here I found the real Caribbean, not an overhyped version of what a tropical island should be.

Just 35 square miles, it boasts 33 beaches with long stretches of sugar-white sand between sunbathers. You can rent a car or hire a driver and tour the entire island in day. Sixteen miles long, it's three miles across at its widest point. Bustling St. Martin sits on the horizon, 20 minutes away by ferry, the hubbub of San Juan is an hour flight by puddle-jumper. You won't find gambling parlors or franchise fast-food chains. The few cruises that call are small. Most of the opportunities for shopping are in local art galleries and craft stores.

So what's there to do? Relax. Read a book. Sip a tropical drink under a palm tree and think of all that snow you're not shoveling back home.

It's British

Anguilla (rhymes with vanilla) had no electricity and few roads until the 1970s. A British Overseas Territory -- yes, they drive on the left -- it made a conscious decision not to go after the mass market when it began developing for tourism. Instead, it remains small and exclusive, off the radar of most casual Caribbean visitors. Your yoga teacher may not have heard of it. Beyoncé has.

A handful of highly rated resorts sit on its west end, but accommodations cover both sides of the lodging spectrum. You'll find affordable boutique hotels, such as the Anacaona, and gated villas like Le Bleu for privacy-seeking celebrities who don't blink at astronomical prices.

Anguilla never had a successful colonial economy like most Caribbean islands. The thin topsoil over a limestone base wouldn't support sugar cane, cotton or tobacco. Plantation owners abandoned their land leaving Anguillians to fend for themselves through drought, famine and hurricanes. They shared what they had and took care of each other, says local historian Colville Petty. The island's spirit of hospitality that visitors now enjoy stems from the interdependence that helped Anguillians survive, he says.

Petty owns Anguilla's must-see visitor attraction, the Heritage Collection Museum detailing the island's history going back to the Amerindians in 2000 B.C. Housed in his boyhood home, it has artifacts from the island's bloodless revolution in the 1960s, slave shackles from its colonial era and amusing exhibits from the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as photos of the first automobiles transported to the island in rowboats. For his diligence in cataloging Anguilla's past, Queen Elizabeth dubbed Petty an O.B.E., officer of the Order of the British Empire.

Life's a beach

Fascinating as it is, you wouldn't want to spend all your vacation in a museum, not when there are so many beaches to enjoy. But with 33 of them, where to start?

Resorts are required to grant access to beaches along their property, so all remain open to everyone.

On the West End, home to the largest resorts, Meads Bay stretches along the north coast where surfers and paddle boarders play when the waves kick up. On the south coast, Maundays Bay attracts swimmers to calm waters, stables at Cove Bay offer horseback riding on the beach and Rendezvous Bay, where kite surfers go airborne, is ringed by nearly three miles of sand.

Mid-island, Sandy Ground remains classically Caribbean with a party atmosphere of beach shacks and bars, fishing boats, and scuba and snorkeling operators. At Crocus Bay, near Anguilla's quiet, low-key capital, The Valley, you'll find Da'Vida, a combination fine-dining restaurant, beach grill, spa and water-sports center where you can book a boat trip to the secluded beach at Little Bay. There's good snorkeling at Little Bay, but you can say that about many of Anguilla's beaches. Coral reefs outline most of the island; hotels often provide masks, snorkels and fins for guests.

On the East End, Shoal Bay East ranks among the most popular beaches with a cluster of beach shacks and good snorkeling on its east side. From Island Harbour, a beach and fishing port, you can flag down a boat for a short ride to Scilly Cay, a speck of coral and sand owned by Eudoxie "Gorgeous" Wallace. For 29 years he's run a restaurant and bar serving notoriously strong run punches and lunches of lobster, crayfish and chicken barbecued on oil-drum grills. A string band often plays on Sundays.

Let's eat

Casual beach dining has its merits, especially on Anguilla where even some beach shacks have cooks with culinary degrees.

More serious diners don't go home hungry, though. For such a small island, Anguilla has a surprising number of fine-dining restaurants, some with celebrity chefs. At least two turned their backs on restaurants in the U.S. to pursue the good life on Anguilla. The husband and wife team behind Blanchards left their longtime home in Vermont, a story told in their novel, "A Trip to the Beach." Veya's CIA-trained chef quit the kitchen of her Pennsylvania establishment after buying a vacant restaurant in Anguilla she saw on the Internet.

Chefs make the most of local foods, which means fresh-caught fish and seafood, chicken and, yes, those goats you see wandering across the road. Wine lists earn Wine Spectator awards, but this being the Caribbean, tropical drinks in a rainbow of colors also find room on menus.

I was sipping one as I read about the Feb. 1 blizzard in Chicago and feeling smug. My thoughtful neighbor cleared my driveway. I owe him big time.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by the Anguilla Tourist Board.*

Anguilla

Getting there: By small plane from Puerto Rico or St. Martin, or by ferry from St. Martin/Sint Maarten.

Getting around: Rent a car or book a driver at your hotel. Preston's Taxi and Tours does short hops as well as day tours, (264) 235-6889.

Money: Officially the Eastern Caribbean Dollar, but U.S. dollars are accepted almost everywhere. Upon departure be prepared to pay, in cash, a \$20 departure tax, \$3 security fee and \$4 tourism fee.

When to go: The island pretty much shuts down in September and October, the height of hurricane season. November to May is peak season. The Moonsplash Music Festival, hosted by local music legend Bankie Banx, is March 27-29 this year, the Festival del Mar is Easter weekend, April 4-5.

Where to stay:

- Anacaona Boutique Hotel: Meads Bay, 27 rooms and suites, winter rates from \$280 per night, double, anacaonahotel.com
- Le Bleu: Little Harbour, private villa with eight to 10 bedrooms, winter rates from \$72,850 per week for eight bedrooms, villalebleu.com

Where to eat:

- Scilly Cay, off Island Harbour, open Wednesdays and Sundays for lunch, (264) 497-5123, scillycayanguilla.com
- Da'Vida, Crocus Bay, (264) 498-5433, davidanguilla.com
- Firefly Restaurant and Bar, Anacaona Hotel, Meads Bay, Thursday night Mayoumba Folkloric Dinner Theatre, (264) 497-6827, anacaonahotel.com
- Veya, Sandy Ground, (264) 498-8392, veya-axa.com
- Blanchards, Meads Bay, (264) 497-6100, blanchardsrestaurant.com

Details: Anguilla Tourist Board, (800) 553-4939, iVisitAnguilla.com

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