

Enticing Antigua

by

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Gasping with the effort, I dug my paddle into the azure Caribbean Sea one more time. Our kayak surged ahead. From the corner of my eye, I saw our rivals slip back as I reached out to touch the dock.

My arms ached but that didn't dampen my elation. Never had I won a race before and never had I kayaked. I couldn't stop beaming. My husband (the rear paddler in our kayak) and I were on an eco-tour of the mangroves of Antigua enjoying the sun, sea, and unique environment of these trees. We were part of a group from all over the United States and Canada but in this kayak race, it was the Edmonton team we had to beat. The age-old rivalry between Calgary and Alberta's capital city had kicked in.

Antigua is a small Caribbean country east of St. Kitts and north of Guadeloupe in the bow of islands linking Cuba to Venezuela, South America. Its original inhabitants, the Arawaks (35-1100 A.D.) came from the Orinoco River valley hopping from island to island. The Caribs drove them from Antigua only to be ousted themselves by Europeans when, in 1684, Sir Christopher Codrington arrived to establish sugar plantations. It was Christopher Columbus, in 1493, who first sighted the island and named it after Santa Maria la Antigua, a miracle-working saint from Seville, Spain.

By the end of the 18th century, Antigua was part of a trade triangle between England, Africa, and the Caribbean. To protect the English sugar and slave trade, Horatio Nelson was sent to head the Squadron of the Leeward Islands and develop the British naval facilities at English Harbour. He called the island a "vile place".

Emancipation of the slaves occurred in 1834 and in 1967, Antigua, along with the islands of Barbuda and Redond, became an associated state of the Commonwealth. They achieved independence in 1981 under the leadership of Vere C. Bird.

When the sugar trade waned in the mid-1800's, Antigua slumped into poverty relying on its agricultural exports. Today, tourism has given the country an economic boost that is reflected in its new schools and hospitals.

Antiguans boast there are 365 beaches on the island, one for every day of the year and it is these expanses of sand and the warm Caribbean sun that draws tourists to the island. Most of its people speak English as well as the Leeward Caribbean Creole dialect and are very friendly and helpful.

Glen and I arrived on the island after spending a grueling 24 hours traveling. When we awoke to rain pattering on the window, my heart sank. We had booked a week of 'fun in the sun' at the all-inclusive resort of Jolly Beach and were a little disappointed to be walking the beach under scudding clouds. Our luck soon changed as these burned off around noon and we lay on the beach enjoying the brilliance of the Caribbean sun and sea. The next day, we took a tour of the city of St. John's (about a half hour drive from the resort).

Antiguans drive on the left hand side of the road and streets are narrow so going anywhere can be a harrowing experience. Goats, sheep, donkeys, cattle, dogs and cats all roam freely so expect delays. The main streets in St. John's run uphill from the sea and its harbour is deep enough for large cruise ships.

Our first stop was the market. Its colour excited our eyes and the displays of fruits and vegetables tantalized our palate. Nearby was a larger-than-life, colourized

statue of V. C. Bird who was the country's first Prime Minister. Wreaths festooned the base of the monument to this national hero who died in 1999.

It was a short walk to the Museum of Antigua and Barbuda where we met Dr. Reginald Murphy, Antigua's prominent archaeologist. He gave us a brief history of the islands as we wandered the tiny museum, (the original colonial courthouse built in 1750). He then led us up the hill to St. John's Anglican Cathedral. Earthquakes damaged the first two cathedrals on this site, so in 1845 the stone structure was rebuilt around a wooden church. The idea being if the stonework collapsed, the inner church would protect the worshippers.

From here we went to Government House which Dr. Murphy explained he had just discovered was originally called Parsonage House. This would explain its proximity to the cathedral. The house evoked images of colonial times and was surrounded by lush gardens. Inside we viewed the dining and drawing rooms and had a chance to meet the Governor General, Dame Louise Agnetha Lake-Tack, a wonderfully gracious woman. She told us she wanted to restore the house to its former glory and pointed to water weeping into plastic buckets set out to protect its plush carpets.

After lunch at the Jolly Beach, we boarded the 'Excellence', a catamaran which took us along the coast to a snorkeling adventure at the famed Cades Reef National Park. As we passed cone-shaped hills rising from the white sand beaches, our captain told us how volcanoes had formed Antigua and coral reefs had added to them. Cades Reef curls out from the coast and the seas of the Caribbean break along it. Beneath the waves, the spectacular reef teems with exotic fish like blue chromis, butterfly fish, groupers, and sea urchins.

Antigua's sister island, Barbuda, was our destination the following day. We grabbed the Barbuda Express ferry in Jolly Harbour. After a brief stop in St. John's, we headed out to sea (it's a 90 minute trip to Barbuda). Here we hit eight foot waves—a moderate pitch according to the crew. Three of our group were sea sick as we quickly lost sight of Antigua. Barbuda is a flat coral island so for most of the trip, we saw nothing but waves.

Barbuda was also settled by Codrington after several attempts to oust the Carib Indians. Today it has a small, fiercely proud population and our tour guide, Lynton Thomas, was also a member of the Senate in Antigua. After landing, he took us to the Frigate Bird Sanctuary at the Codrington Lagoon. Over five thousand birds inhabit the Barbuda mangroves and when a cloud of these large birds (4-5 foot wingspan) flew overhead, it was a sight to behold. Mating season had begun so the males flaunted their bright red chests to the circling females. After mating and raising their chicks, the males will then fly to the Galapagos Island off Ecuador to court the female population there.

Our next stop was lunch at a beach restaurant (now called Martello Anchorage Bar and Grill) in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere. Its claim to fame was a pink sand beach and Norris Harris, the proprietor. He warmly welcomed us to Barbuda and served up a simple barbecued chicken buffet. He had arranged for the local TV station to record our visit and after we ate, he interviewed several of the guests about American football, as he was a fan. It was my husband's birthday so it was a special gift to speak on 'national' TV.

Then we strolled the pink sand of Norris's beach. Single-celled animals called Foraminifera (*homotrema rubrum*) live on the coral reefs and produce a dark red skeletal-like shell. When they die, these erode and wash ashore giving the beach its rosy hue.

After signing Norris's surfboard, we returned to the ferry. The crew assured us the way back would be less rough. It wasn't.

The next day, we decided to take a break from water activities so did a tour of Shirley Heights and the Nelson dockyards. First we viewed Runaway Beach on Dickenson Bay as we drove up to the fortifications. Shirley Heights is military complex skirting a ridge. Named after Sir Thomas Shirley, Governor of the Leeward Islands (1768-1774), it was built in 1781 to protect the dockyards and the sugar cane trade. Not far from the ruins (earthquake damage) was a cemetery. My husband was fascinated by the tomb of one woman who died of dysentery exactly 100 years before his birth. There is also an obelisk honouring the soldiers of the 54th regiment who died between 1848 and 1851.

Nelson's Dockyard in English Harbour was originally called His Majesty's Antigua Naval Yard and was built around 1725 to maintain Royal Navy ships. In 1889, the navy abandoned the yards and released them to Antigua in 1906. Restoration began in 1951 and that's when the name changed to Nelson's Dockyard. Not only was the dockyard a historical site, it was also a working pier with a customs office for the many luxury yachts that ply the Caribbean waters. The museum was small but informative and the rum punch at The Admiral's Inn was tasty after a hot day of sightseeing.

The kayaking tour finished our week in Antigua with a splash. Run by Jennie and Conrad La Barrie, "Paddles" is an eco-tour that doesn't disappoint. Boats take you

through North Sound Marine Park where frigate birds and egrets nest. The water is very clear and gives a good view of the starfish and turtles lurking among the mangrove roots. After the race, we headed to Great Bird Island passing a rock formation called Hell's Gate where the waves roared through a cavernous opening. We then snorkeled the island's reefs and again, the fish were spectacular. Glen even saw a sea urchin with spines 8 inches long. As with the kayaking, if you've never snorkeled before, the guides give easy-to-understand lessons. The sandy beach beckoned and some chose to rest while others climbed to the island's highest point, a 300 foot hill. Here we were 'buzzed' by noisy red-billed tropic birds. Upon our return to the Paddle's clubhouse, we were treated to a rose petal foot bath, a cool wet towel, and rum punch. Hummingbirds and banana quits (black and yellow birds) haunt the La Barrie's colourful gardens.

We arrived back at the resort to witness a spectacular sunset which made us long to lengthen our stay on this unique island. Glen and I had barely scratched the surface of what Antigua has to offer.

If you go

Antigua & Barbuda website -- www.antigua-barbuda.org

Barbuda -- www.barbudaful.net/index.html

Paddles Kayak and Snorkel Eco Adventure -- www.antiguapaddles.com/

Jolly Beach Resort -- www.jollybeachresort.com/

To view my photographs, go to www.vashti.com/antigua