

Antigua

By Kathryn Lemmon

Antigua and little sister Barbuda make up a two-island nation in the Caribbean. If you're checking the map, follow your finger east and slightly south of Puerto Rico.

Jolly Beach Resort hugs a gently curved beach punctuated by palm trees on the Southwest coast. At either end, green peaks contribute definition, while neighboring islands compete for your attention. Taken as a package, it's the tropical setting people envision when they dream about their honeymoon.



The pool and wedding gazebo at Jolly Beach Resort, Antigua
Photo by: David O'Hara

Pretty as it may be, Jolly Beach is only one of over 300 beaches on Antigua. In democratic fashion, each is open to the public whether you're Eric Clapton or a T-shirt vendor. Mr. Clapton has a residence on Antigua. From a distance, it looked palatial, as expected.

Apparently Christopher Columbus never set foot on the island. He selected the name and went about his merry way. Ah, what's an explorer to do, so many islands, so little time!

The resort is an all-inclusive property offering a variety of water activities, plus five restaurants. Reservations are required for their three specialty options, but the international buffet is open daily, no reservations needed. Lunch time until mid-afternoon, the Coconut Grill operates poolside.

I ordered jerk chicken from the grill, a dish I've attempted to reproduce at home, with little success. Theirs was done to perfection and spicy enough to make my lips tingle. It was necessary to sip two glasses of frozen pina colada to even out the flavors.

The resort hosts weddings throughout the year. They arrange nearly as many ceremonies annually as Antigua has beaches. The favored spot, a wedding gazebo, looks over the main pool and ocean, though some opt for a ceremony on the beach. I saw two weddings during my float time in the pool--a new record and dripping wet to boot!

Regardless of price range, every room at the resort has a balcony. Morning coffee tastes infinitely better with an ocean view. Back home the colored leaves were falling fast, but not on Antigua, all plant life was abundantly green from brief, refreshing showers.

We arrived on the evening of November first, the date for their annual Independence Day celebration. Twenty-five years ago, in 1981, they separated from the British.

Tea and cricket are still in evidence and a high percentage of visitors come from the U.K. Driving is on the left, another vestige of English Colonialism.

In fact, British carriers have direct flights where you step on a plane in often-overcast London and step off into the brilliant sunshine of Antigua. That first breath of warm island air must be intoxicating.

Among others, we met honeymooners from Wales and Ireland.

Island excursions usually include an area known as Shirley Heights on the south coast--named for a former Governor Thomas Shirley. The combination harbor-mountain-sky views can overload the senses. Throw in the fine yachts and sailing vessels moored in harbor, and it's easy to imagine jet-setters (or maybe James Bond) popping in for Antigua Sailing week held in April.

Our open-air jeep tour lasted from 8:30 to 3:00 including a meal and swimming stop. During lunch we happened to see four cows ambling along the beach. That was a new one! Forget the worry about stingrays, watch out for the cow pies in the sand.

Local driver/guide Elmo was at the wheel. Elmo had a natural wit and kept us laughing as well as bouncing along the narrow roads.

The sound and light show at Dow's Hill Interpretive Center (on the way to Shirley Heights) encapsulates Antigua's entire history into a fifteen minute time span.

Colors are definite in Antigua; nothing wishy-washy. The blues are profound, whether the aquamarine of the ocean or deep sky blue and the greens are verdant.

History is an interest of mine, thus I was eager to see Nelson's Dockyard. The Dockyard officially re-opened in 1961 however restoration appears to be on-going.

The petite tour guide said Admiral Nelson didn't care for the island and the feelings were mutual. He preferred his cramped quarters aboard ship. Maybe he should have striped off his heavy military garb and chilled-out with a long swim in the clear waters.

One morning was set aside for a trip to the capital city of St. John's. The resort has a shuttle to town and the drive takes about 25 minutes with the return at noon. Don't expect to see any high-rise structures in this capital city; most are smallish, mom-and-pop style establishments. Once there, I trekked to the small cemetery outside St. John's cathedral.

The cemetery was quiet. A number of the time-worn grave markers were tilting or completely fallen over. Yet the picture they presented was exquisite, like Venice where decay is significant to the sum total. More like a city park, residents sat on tomb slabs as if they were park benches.

A lime-green lizard draped himself upside down over the tombstone of Samuel Smith, who departed this life in 1758. His round bead eyes watched me with the calm assurance of long-term resident who knows no threat among the souls in the churchyard. He held his spot, I left to explore.

For more information go to:

www.jollybeachresort.com

www.jollydive.com

www.antigua-barbuda.org