

escapade



Passengers disembark from the Niki V, a public ferry that makes the 25-minute run from St. Martin to Anguilla's Blowing Point. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



One of Anguilla's many stunning beaches, Rendezvous Bay, is a wonderful place to partake in water sports or to simply relax under a palm.

PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



Guests load up their plates with fresh fish and other tantalizing fare at Zemi Beach Resort on Shoal Bay East. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



Once off a public or charter ferry from St. Martin, visitors pass through Anguilla's Blowing Point ferry terminal, where they will find a small immigration and customs' office. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



During a beachfront dinner at Cap Juluca, the author and her mom feast on delicious creations, including this flavourful lobster fettuccine.

PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



The author, right, cozies up with her mother, Betty Krawchuk, before a beachfront dinner at spectacular Cap Juluca. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



Cap Juluca, a 73-hectare, award-winning resort on Anguilla's southwest coast has been rated one of the most romantic and exclusive resorts in the world. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



Talk about a view! This magnificent Moroccan-themed structure houses Cap Juluca's signature dining room, Pimms, and Spice, a chic lounge and restaurant overlooking Maundays Bay. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



The author and her mom post for a photo overlooking gorgeous Sandy Ground, Anguilla's main port. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



The author's mother, Betty Krawchuk, takes in the sunset en route to a restaurant in Shoal Bay Village.

PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



Colourful flowers like this pink rhododendron abound at Shoal Bay Villas.

PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Anguilla: A magical land that few know, but should

CATHY DONALDSON
FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Imagine an island where turquoise seas nuzzle white sand shores, where the average monthly temperature is about 26 C, where the food - especially the fresh fish - is heavenly (almost as good as the rum punch), where locals are genuinely happy to see you, where crowds are non-existent.

Dream no longer, my friends. Welcome to Anguilla.

You mean Angola? Wrong continent. Antigua? Closer, but no cigar.

Anguilla (pronounced an-GWIL-luh, like "vanilla") is a slender, fairly flat piece of coral and limestone in the Eastern Caribbean, situated east of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, directly north of St. Martin. The name of the British overseas territory refers to the eel-like shape of the land, 26 kilometres long by five kilometres wide.

What Anguilla lacks in size, it more than makes up for in hospitality and pure, unspoiled beauty, displayed most stunningly at its 33 beaches, some of the best in the world.

"You have to go for at least two weeks because one is just not enough," says Shannon Smith of Riverview, N.B., who has been visiting the island with his wife, Alison, for years. "It's a gorgeous place with beautiful people. It's my favourite place on earth."

I recently visited Anguilla with my mother who, like me, was fed up with winter. We also figured the trip would be a terrific way to celebrate milestone birthdays, on the condition details regarding which milestones were not divulged.

The journey seemed even more appropriate in light of the fact Anguilla itself is in celebration mode this year, marking the 50th anniversary of its bloodless revolution, during which it seceded from St. Kitts and embarked on its own journey towards self-determination.

Our adventure began with flights from the Maritimes to Toronto, then to Anguilla's neighbouring island of St. Maarten via the Princess Juliana International Airport, where most

international flights to the area touch down.

After a 10-minute cab from the airport on St. Maarten's Dutch side, we reached the town of Marigot on French St. Martin and found the public ferry to Anguilla. Seas were rough, but our captain appeared unruffled, delivering us to our destination in about 25 minutes. (We would opt for Calypso Charters on our return, a pricier cruise, but a better experience overall. If your pockets are overflowing, consider a seven-minute flight.)

It didn't take long after our arrival at the Blowing Point ferry terminal on Anguilla's south coast to see a change in pace from busier St. Martin. As our driver transported us to our accommodations at the opposite end of the island, we noted the traffic and density of hotels were gone. We slowed only on occasion now, mainly to make way for random goats crossing the road (they roam free in Anguilla) or to pause when a zenaïda dove - the territory's national bird - landed on the street.

The tranquility continued when we checked into a one-bedroom apartment at Shoal Bay Villas, tucked away on three-kilometre Shoal Bay East, an epic expanse of sugary-soft sand and crystal-clear turquoise waters.

After a warm welcome by proprietor Kathy Haskins and her daughter, Rachel, we spent most of the next few days immersed in complete relaxation.

Mornings were ridiculously peaceful. Since each of Shoal Bay Villas' 23 units includes a fully-equipped kitchen, mom and I picked up groceries early on in the trip so we could make breakfast in our jammies, munching on fresh fruit and toast, sipping tea on our shaded veranda, tropical breezes floating by. There were no jet skis to be heard (they're banned), no large cruise ships with hordes of passengers to be seen (only smaller ships are welcome).

The rest of our days were consumed with Shoal Bay's pristine beach, casually strolling along it for hours on end, splashing in its warm surf, swimming and floating aimlessly and occasionally napping atop its palm-lined shores

on comfy loungers under wide umbrellas. I pondered working out at the property's fitness centre, doing laps in the pool or having a treatment in the mini-spa, but couldn't drag myself off the beach. It was just that beautiful.

At sunset, the idyllic coast captured us again, making us stare at its sparkling seas from our beachfront balcony or one of several open-air restaurants in the vicinity.

Even at night, as we settled down to rest our sun-drenched frames in our villa's well-appointed bedroom, we couldn't get enough of the adjacent sea. We kept windows open in lieu of available air conditioning, the subtle sound of waves lulling us off to dreamland.

Our Shoal Bay bliss was soaked up with nary a crowd in sight, often nary a person. In fact, friends who saw my photos couldn't understand where the other tourists were.

Cardigan Connor, Parliamentary Secretary of Anguilla's Ministry of Tourism (and a famed Anguillian-born former English cricketer), is aware of the challenges, but says the government is working hard to increase visitor traffic, especially among repeat guests.

"It's a big deal, that relationship between repeat visitors and the Anguillians," says Connor. "There's an energy, a personal bond you can't manufacture. We want to build upon that."

I understood his philosophy, having quickly developed bonds with locals while staying at Shoal Bay Villas. When it was time to leave for another property we'd booked, it was hard to say goodbye as we felt like we'd known staff for ages.

With rental car packed, we set off, mom and I uncertain about my ability to drive on the left, steer on the right. Surprisingly, it was quite easy, due to various factors: Anguilla only has a few main roads and they are paved; there is little traffic; signage is decent; and there are only a few stoplights. (Just watch the roundabouts, mostly found near the island's capital 'The Valley'.) Rather than being rough around the edges, Anguilla is a bit rough around its interior. Scrubby tree

growth, shops that have seen better days and sporadic half-built homes (locals build as far as their savings allow) dot the landscape. Yet round a corner to the coast and, presto, the view improves radically, a stretch of nirvana suddenly before you, an incredible beach like Rendezvous Bay or Mead's Bay, or a property like the one in which we stayed for the remainder of our visit - Cap Juluca.

Mom and I felt our jaws drop as our puny rental approached this 73-hectare, award-winning resort, located on spectacular Maundays Bay along Anguilla's southwest coast. We quickly realized why Cap Juluca has been rated one of the most romantic and exclusive resorts in the world.

At first glance, it was as though we had entered a Greek village, the white-washed exteriors of the 15 villas housing Cap Juluca's 70 beachfront guestrooms reflecting the intense, midday sun. Then we noted the facades were balanced by lush greenery, gardens of palms, bougainvillea and other plants, no doubt some of the 60,000 new arrivals set in the ground during the property's 'refresh' by owners Charles and Linda Hickox in 2013, 25 years after its original opening.

Along with the Grecian touches and striking vegetation, there was a cool Moroccan vibe to Cap Juluca, evidenced by large archways and domes, colourful rugs and magnificent lanterns.

Inside our guestroom, just steps from the resort's 1.5-kilometre beach, the drama and opulence continued. Dark wooden furniture, luscious linens, Bose Wave stereos - no expense was spared. Like every room on site, ours opened to a private covered terrace via massive doors designed with dramatic louvered plantation shutters. We felt like celebs.

The resort's lavish standards were again apparent when it was time to dine. Our most memorable meal was our first at the property, a dinner by tiki torch on the beach in front of Cap Juluca's exquisite Main House. We kicked off sandals

beneath our snazzy dresses and sunk toes into the sand while feasting on heirloom beet and goat cheese salads, a tantalizing lobster fettuccine, ending the extraordinary meal with a toast to our respective birthdays and to Anguilla on its special year. Memories to last a lifetime.

We later investigated Cap Juluca's more traditional dining venues, each offering delicious, internationally-inspired fare blended with the flavours of the island, all with a garden-to-table approach.

The resort's signature dining room, Pimms, features Mediterranean seafood dishes with a European twist, creations such as ahi tuna tartare with crispy shallots and wild rice, and roasted grouper filet in a coconut lobster sauce. We also ventured to Blue, Cap Juluca's casual breakfast and lunch open-air beachfront eatery. Spice is a chic lounge and restaurant overlooking Maundays Bay, while Maundays Club is a daytime hangout where guests can relish the views and sip coffee, refreshing non-alcoholic drinks and cocktails.

When we were not exploring the property and/or eating/drinking, we most treasured time spent relaxing beachside, the exceptional Cap Juluca staff happy to tend to our every need, from delivering complimentary chilled towels and ice cold bottled water to serving up homemade sorbet served daily at 3. (Spoiled? Yes!)

There was so much more we could have done, like partake in the resort's extensive array of watersports, schedule an in-room spa treatment or hit the nearby golf course, if we were so inclined.

We'll save all that for the return trip to our island paradise - with or without any birthday milestones.

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Located on Maundays Bay, Cap Juluca features a stellar beach with staff happy to tend to visitors' every need, such as delivering complimentary chilled towels and cold, bottled water.

PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON/FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL