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TRUTH IN TRAVEL

APRIL 2006

## INTIMATE CARIBBEAN

**13** ISLANDS YOU CAN (ALMOST) CALL YOUR OWN

EXCLUSIVE

THE NEW **SEVEN  
WONDERS**

AMAZING SIGHTS  
WORTH THE TRIP

TOP 50  
**SPAS**

**SPAIN**  
BEAUTY AND  
A BARGAIN

**82** FEEL-GOOD GETAWAYS

HOW SPOILING YOURSELF CAN HELP OTHERS  
(A WORLDWIDE GUIDE)



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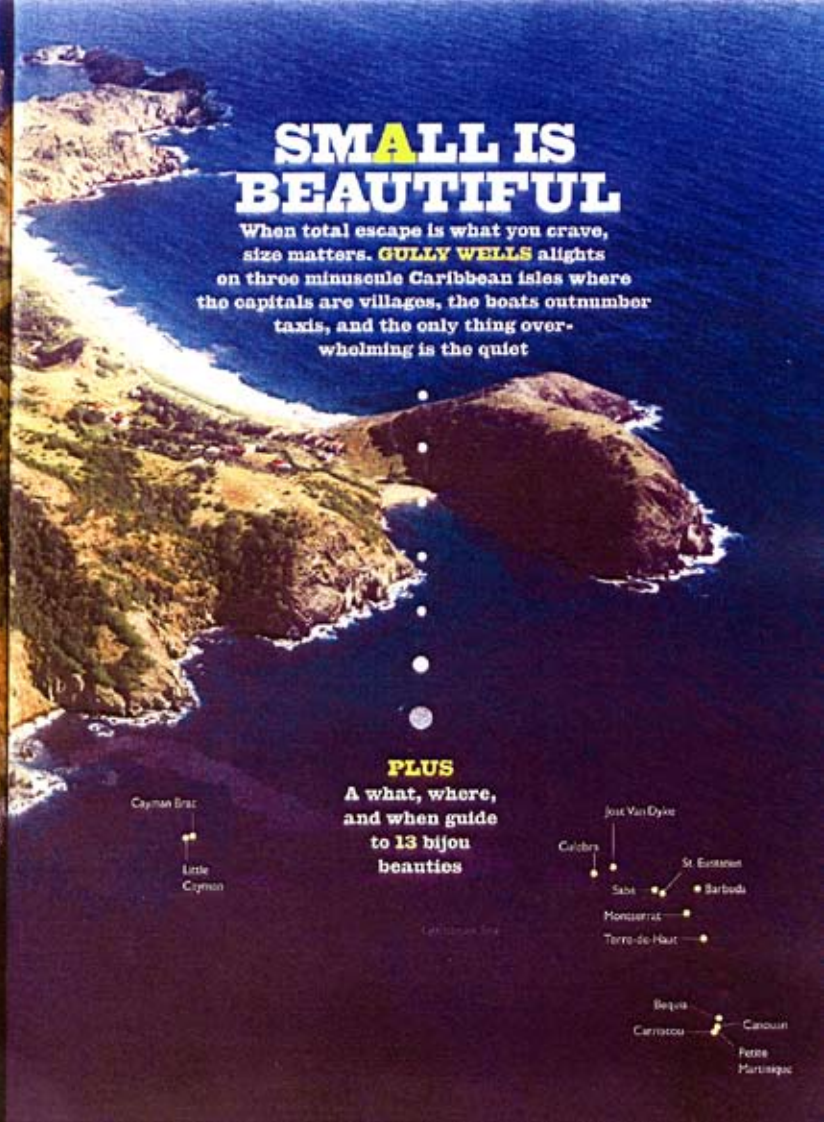


An island in the  
Caribbean  
with the most  
concentrated  
beachfront

Photographs by MICHEL FIGUET

# SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

When total escape is what you crave, size matters. **GULLY WELLS** alights on three minuscule Caribbean isles where the capitals are villages, the boats outnumber taxis, and the only thing overwhelming is the quiet



## PLUS

A what, where, and when guide to 13 bijou beauties

Cayman Brac  
Little Cayman

Jost Van Dyke  
Culebra  
Saba  
St. Eustace  
Barbuda  
Montserrat  
Terre-de-Haut

Bequia  
Carrisacu  
Carouai  
Petite Martinique

Carriacou, St. Vincent









Sandbox picnic: Barbuda's Beach House prepares private picnics at which lobster is a specialty. And no wonder: It is one of the island's two major exports, the other being sand.

they did so was never made clear to me, since the endless wars over the islands, mainly between the French and the British, had ended almost a century before. Maybe it was just simple French hubris and nationalism (always a pervasive force in nineteenth-century French history), but then I figured out that it was also about giving the hordes of prisoners, who'd been convicted of various crimes in La Metropole and then shipped to the island, something to do. (The nearby island of Désirade was a dumping ground for lepers until the middle of the last century and has never quite recovered.) The \$2.50 fee covered the *jardin de cactus* as well, but I decided to skip this unappealing collection of dusty phallic plants and headed instead across the moat and into the dank entrance. A series of cavernous rooms was given over to a display of the decisive Battle of the Saintes in 1782, when the British admiral George Rodney delivered a fatal blow to the French navy, headed by Count François Joseph Paul de Grasse. The exhibition consisted of some tattered flags, a depressing portrait of a florid-faced De Grasse (who, with two thousand French dead compared with 243 Brits, had every reason to look a bit upset, if not actually drunk), and hundreds of little paper boats representing the stages of the battle, which effectively ended, once and for all, any French challenge to the British in the West Indies. So much for French hubris and nationalism. I had the feeling that Emperor Napoléon III, after whom the fort is named, would not have been amused.

When I got back in the car, Sylvie wanted to show me "his" island, which, touchingly, he said would take less than an hour. It's impossible, and absolutely pointless, of course, if you live in an Actual Place not to make constant comparisons between your life back home and the way people like Sylvie live on their (*Continued on page 148*)

idyllic corner of France. (The French Caribbean islands are *départements* of France, sending senators and deputies to the National Assembly and receiving generous amounts of EU funding. Since Terre-de-Haut is part of France, the islanders refer to France itself as La Metropole.) So when Sylvie offered to give me a ride up to the fort, I took one look at my flimsy sandals and hopped in beside him.

We drove to the highest point on the island, where the French had built a forbidding-looking fort in 1867. Why

## Barbuda

An all-beach bonanza, this 62-square-mile island has miles of deserted white and pink strands—and little else. Bring books. Development is confined to coastal resorts, several quite exclusive.

**You'll meet** Escapees from the world, beachcombers, day-trippers.  
**Posh nights** The Beach House (631-537-1352; thebeachhousebarbuda.com; doubles, \$750–\$972, including breakfast and four-course dinner) and Coco Point Lodge (212-986-1416; cocopointlodge.com; doubles, \$900–\$1,430).

**Cheap nights** Palm Tree Guest House (268-562-5058; barbudaful.com; doubles, \$80–\$120).

**Top table** The Beach House—restaurant open to guests only (breakfast and dinner included in room rate; lunch entrées, \$10–\$30).

**Good local food** Palm Tree (268-560-2723; entrées, \$10–\$20).

**Wheels** Byron Askie rents a few cars (268-773-6082; \$50 per day).

**Diversion** Frigate Bird Sanctuary; arrange a tour through your hotel or Norman Griffin (268-772-0882; \$50).

**Hazards** Bumpy, dusty dirt roads; mosquitoes.

**Warning** No real town center; no nightlife outside the posh hotels.

**Etc.** Barbudaful.com, and Claire or Mackenzie Frank at the Art Cafe (268-460-0434).

## Places & Prices

We deliver the up-to-date low-down on ten more miniature Caribbean gems on page 152.





## CARIBBEAN ISLANDS

(Continued from page 146) Tropical Isles. As we drove slowly down the hill, with the surreal blue of the Caribbean flashing into sight at each turn, the narrow road shaded by jacarandas and huge banyan trees, and the little white boats floating across the harbor, it was hard not to be stunned by the beauty of this place. It looked like a painting by a tropical Grandmère Moses. "Oui, c'est belle," Sylvie agreed, and then we rounded a corner and he pointed out "his" beach, a tiny curve of sand where he kept his fishing boat. Nearby, I saw a neat little house with a red roof (built by Sylvie), and three children who were having lunch on the veranda with their mother. "C'est ma famille," he said with an enormous smile, which managed to convey both innocence and pride. He'd been born on the island and had visited Guadeloupe only on day-trips once or twice a year, to shop in Pointe-à-Pitre. And what about those gendarmes? I asked. Was there ever anything for them to do? Apparently not on an island where people don't bother to lock their doors and crime statistics don't exist.

On the boat leaving Terre-de-Haut to return to Guadeloupe, I reflected on my time on the island. It fulfilled every fantasy you might have about escaping to a place where the quotidian burdens of a busy, pressured, and complicated life were magically re-

moved. I'd walked from my hotel to Pompiere Beach, possibly one of the prettiest in the entire Caribbean, and done nothing more productive than float in the pure aquamarine water and read in the shade of a coconut tree. One morning, I'd watched a group of women sitting in a front yard, preparing food for a wedding, and later that same day, I'd seen the bride in her tulle extravaganza emerging from the church. I was even invited to join in the celebration at the groom's house next door. Small size seemed to equal blissful simplicity.

But then on the boat, I met a Frenchman who gave me a slightly different view of life on Terre-de-Haut. A teacher from La Metropole, he had been transferred four years ago from a school in some gloomy town on the Belgian border to . . . paradise. The man had a slightly manic look about him, and as he talked—and talked and talked—I began to see why. He was clutching a hefty paperback on postmodern French philosophy, rather the way a drowning man might hold on to a life preserver, and explained that he "escaped" to Pointe-à-Pitre as often as he could. When he felt he was about to be driven out of his mind by tedium, he took a quick trip to Cuba, where at least there was some "real life." Yes, he had a local girlfriend (although I got the impres-

sion she wasn't much for philosophy), and he had his books, but that was it. As we said good-bye on the dock at Trois Rivières, my heart went out to him. I could understand his dilemma, even though as a traveler I did indeed feel as though I had spent three days in paradise.

**A**FTER THE EDENIC BEAUTY of Terre-de-Haut, arriving in Barbuda was something of a shock. And the terrifying fifteen-minute flight from Antigua in a plane the size of a large coffin didn't help. Stupidly happy to be alive, I looked around the arrivals hut and saw a peeling notice board labeled TOURIST INFORMATION, and below it, a single, blurry black-and-white photograph of a ruined structure called Martello Tower. That was it. I had no time to inquire about what other delights the island had to offer because I was quickly bundled into a large van with several other (white) passengers and we sped off. With each bump, jolt, and grind, I began to think more and more fondly of the EU-funded road I'd just left behind. I also started to wonder why an island where the average hotel room rate hovers around a thousand dollars a night couldn't lay its hands on some asphalt. An interesting question, but one that nobody

in the van or, I was to discover, on the entire island had an answer to.

Our arrival at the Beach House had a certain sexy drama that made me forget the bumps and jolts. As we climbed the steps up to the great house, two enormous louvered doors were flung open and we were confronted by what looked like an incredibly chic airplane hangar lit by candles. A long line of lights embedded in the wooden floor marked the way to the enormous pool, which in turn led your eye toward the ocean beyond, where I could hear the relentless, soothing symphony of crashing waves. Not bad as first impressions go.

A much-needed cocktail, a welcoming word or two from our hostess, and it was time to change for dinner. There's a certain assumption at remote, sophisticated, and, yes, expensive hotels like the Beach House that guests are really members of a small club or, better still, friends. The reasoning is that you must surely have something in common with your fellow guests if you are willing to isolate yourself miles from anywhere in a cocoon of insane luxury. And in a way, it worked—at least that first night, when we all sat down at one long table on the terrace for a dinner of tagliatelle that rivaled

the best of an Apulian kitchen, lobster that put Maine to shame, and cappuccino that out-foamed anything at Harry's Bar.

**T**HE TEMPTATION, ON THOSE very rare occasions when you find yourself in a place where they treat you like the Queen of Sheba, is to stay put and encourage them to lay it on with a trowel. But I had come to Barbuda to discover an island, meet the people, sample their cuisine, and of course see that Martello Tower. My winged chariot turned out to be an old green jeep that Byron-rent-a-car had promised would be delivered the very next morning. Being quite lazy, I am generally a big fan of Island Time, but not always. After a frenzy of calls, I was finally introduced to Kerwin, whose sister Olivia worked at the hotel and was also, conveniently, engaged to Byron-rent-a-car's son. With these connections, the green jeep was finally mine, and the intrepid Kerwin and I set off on a short tour.

As we bumped along, I studied the map, which was disturbingly—or refreshingly, depending on your point of view—empty. The island is about eight miles by fourteen, but all the map showed was a big blank

space in the middle, a coast road, and a few points of interest, such as the unpromisingly named Rubbish Bay, some caves, a vaguely defined area known as the Highlands (135 feet above sea level), and the town of Codrington, where almost all 1,500 Barbudans live. The landscape was flat and scrubby, and we didn't pass another car, which seemed odd until Kerwin explained that the only gas station had run out of gas and the delivery from Antigua wasn't due until the next day.

The name Codrington rang a bell, and I suddenly remembered that the most beautiful library in the whole of Oxford, in All Souls College, is called the Codrington. And then it came back to me: The family who had built that eighteenth-century library and donated its exquisite collection of books to the university had made their fortune from West Indian plantations and had, right up to the 1920s, owned the entire island of Barbuda. As we rounded a corner, the town that they had named after themselves came into view and was anything but exquisite. Straggly, careworn, and dusty, its mostly single-story houses stretched out ahead without any discernible center or design. A couple of bars (one of them owned by the ubiquitous



## CARIBBEAN ISLANDS

Byron-rent-a-car, who offered us a beer on the house), a restaurant or two, a store, and the empty gas station—that was about it.

That evening, just as the sun was setting, I went for a walk along the perfect, deserted, seven-mile beach at the Beach House and thought about what I'd seen on Barbuda. I knew that the island's three hotels—the other two being the K Club and Coco Point—provided much-needed jobs for the locals, and I knew that taxes from these hotels represented fifty percent of Barbuda's revenue. Yet the inevitable and stark contrast between the two worlds is still there, even if you choose to close your eyes, take another sip of Krug, and ignore it.

**S**OMEBODY ONCE TOLD ME that the original *King Kong* was filmed on Saba, or, more precisely, that there was one establishing shot of its forbidding outline and then the action switched to a Hollywood back lot. As I approached the jetty after a stomach-churning trip from Sint Maarten—at least five passengers were seasick—I could see why Saba had been chosen as the place for Kong's lair. The island rises from the sea like some huge and monolithic medieval fortress. Until the

1940s, there wasn't a single road on the entire island; until the 1960s, when an airstrip the size of a suburban driveway was carved into the side of the mountain, the only approach was by boat. Ever since 1492, when the island was spotted by Columbus (who didn't bother to stop and claim this sparkling jewel for Spain), it has been one of the most isolated places in the Caribbean. Saba was settled primarily by Scottish and Irish immigrants in the 1630s but became Dutch in 1640 and remains so to this day. Only now, in the last twenty years, has tourism breached this fortress. But since Saba has no beaches and only a few small hotels, the number of visitors is much lower than the locals and the government would like.

I staggered off the boat, fell into a taxi, and began the slow climb up the snaky road that switchbacks precariously up the mountain—toward The Bottom. Just as I was wondering why anyone would call a village located halfway up a mountain The Bottom, the road twisted, and up ahead lay a totally different, utterly beguiling sylvan landscape. Suddenly I was looking at softly rolling fields and tiny white gingerbread cottages with red roofs and green shutters and neat gardens, all set in what

seemed like a circular valley. The "valley" was, in fact, the bottom of a caldera. Walking through The Bottom later that day, I had the strange feeling that I'd stumbled across an English village lost in time and somehow flung down in the middle of the Caribbean. I counted three churches but no shops—touristy or otherwise—and not a restaurant, bar, or even sober café in sight.

One of the larger houses had a Dutch flag fluttering patriotically outside and a gentleman, perhaps in his eighties, with ice-blue eyes and a crumpled white linen suit, coming slowly down its front steps. He smiled, said good afternoon, and asked where I was from. We started chatting, and he suggested that I come with him to an exhibition in the village hall. Having absolutely nothing better to do, I agreed.

Inside the room, the walls were plastered with huge color photographs of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, looking queenly in pearls and pale-blue eye shadow, and doing queenly things like holding a bouquet. A small gathering of elderly groupies—including my new friend—shuffled about the hall.

The next day, much against my better judgment and breaking the habit of an

exercise-free lifetime, I decided to go for a hike in the rain forest. It just seemed the right thing to do. Some PR wizard had once called Saba the "unspoiled queen of the Caribbean," and with its strictly controlled building codes and sprawling, pristine nature preserves, the wizard's palaver was actually true. And where better to start my hike than at the Ecolodge Rainforest restaurant? Its name alone was an inspiration, as were the brightly painted cottages, the jungly Rousseau-esque murals in the dining room, the organicsalads, and the solar heating. I'd taken a taxi from The Bottom to the Ecolodge to conserve energy (mine, not the world's) and then set off after lunch to hike back to the hotel. Things started out well enough, with the dappled sunlight streaming through the trees, the moss-covered path as springy as a deep pile carpet, the way bordered by the remains of a stone wall and covered in minute, creamy eyelash orchids (so named because they look like fake lashes, custom-made for albinos). But then just as quickly, the rain forest lived up to its name. First it was a refreshing drizzle, then a rainstorm, and then an actual deluge as I found myself slithering down a vertiginous rocky path, clinging to roots and branches.

Finally, a good hour later, I mercifully saw signs of civilization in the distance. I somehow ended up in the well-kept garden of an old sea-captain's house, face-to-face with a bust of . . . Simón Bolívar. According to the plaque, the government of Venezuela had donated the statue to commemorate the bicentennial of the birth of The Liberator. But why?

Inside the little stone museum, the caretaker explained. Quite a few Sabamen had worked as gunrunners and privateers for Bolívar, who had visited the island and recruited them in 1816, during the war for the liberation of Venezuela from Spain. Like the old gentleman in The Bottom, the caretaker had pale, pale blue eyes and the kind of rosy complexion that could have indicated a Dutch or Scottish heritage. She told me that she had been "born a Hassell and married a Peterson" (two names that crop up in seventeenth-century records and are still common on Saba). She could trace her ancestry back more than two hundred years, like many others on the island—most of whom seemed to be related to her, and to one another. The cozy claustrophobia of such a tight-knit community was fascinating, reassuring, and disturbing all at the same time.

**A**S IDYLIC ANTIDOTES TO BIG-city life, Terre-de-Haut, Barbuda, and Saba all had the requisite degree of remoteness, that delicious sense of being totally cut off from the demonic demands of the modern world, but it was ultimately their size that seduced me. It may be an illusion—or possibly a luxury experienced only by the visitor—but life did seem calmer, simpler, and less out of control on these islands. The fact that my watch literally stopped the instant I landed on Terre-de-Haut may have helped just a bit. Or maybe the god of travel was trying to tell me something. There was no point in rushing (where would that get you?), or worrying about getting lost (with one road and 1,500 helpful guides, it was impossible), or fretting about your schedule (on islands this tiny, there's time for everything). While so many Caribbean islands have succumbed to the onslaught of mass tourism, these three dots have miraculously, stubbornly retained their quiet individuality.

No woman is an island, but it sure helps her soul—to say nothing of her sanity—to be able to escape to an extremely small one every now and then. □