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# White-hot Caribbean

On the sister islands of Antigua and Barbuda, the revitalized hotel scene is making waves. BY SHANE MITCHELL

**L**IKE OTHER ISLES IN THE British West Indies, the commonwealth state of Antigua and Barbuda models itself on that chilly isle far across the Atlantic: vestiges of the empire (cricket, high tea) are still fused with Caribbean culture (reggae, conch fritters). Last March, the twin-island nation bucked tradition and voted for change. After more than 30 years under the rule of the Bird family, Antigua booted the corrupt regime from power and installed a new majority party in the regional parliament. Chatting about politics with taxi driver Bobby Francis, I ask how one clan managed to keep an iron grip on the government for so long. "Till recently," he says with a chuckle, "a lot of the dead was voting." That ended when Baldwin Spencer, head of the country's UPP (United Progressive Party), launched »

Clean living in the cool white lounge at the Beach House on Barbuda.



## NEXT CHECKING IN

a successful voter registration drive aimed at abolishing the Caribbean version of the hanging chad. Spencer was elected prime minister, sending a message of promise to this burgeoning island.

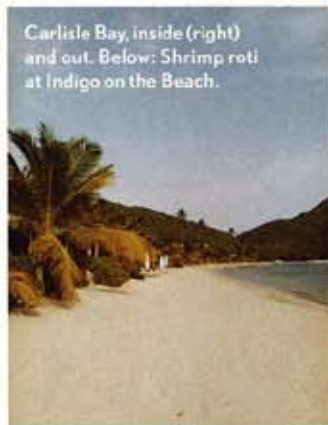
I first observed Antigua's progress 20 years ago, when I sailed boats professionally. Back then, Antigua Sailing Week was a rum-fueled blowout that transformed a quiet island into the yachting world's wildest dock party. The rest of the year, Antigua remained blessedly provincial: cattle grazed by the road and a handful of simple beachfront resorts catered to sun-worshipping prepsters.

These days, uniformed schoolchildren still trade candy on the wooden porches of one-room groceries, and ladies hold unofficial best-Sunday-hat competitions at rural churches. Even so, in villages that until recently lacked running water, cell phones are now the norm. In English Harbour, Italian mega-yachts ride at anchor next to wooden sloops, and Tod's sandals outnumber Top-Siders. Sushi is replacing goat roti on beach-bar menus. And two top resorts—each with a loyal constituency that has seen Antigua through thick and thin—have launched their own reinvention campaigns, while, at the same time, two European hoteliers have transformed existing properties into style-savvy getaways. It sure beats a brine-soaked berth on a racing boat.

### ANTIGUA Carlisle Bay

Gordon Campbell Gray is rearranging the furniture. The owner of Carlisle Bay can't stand to see ottomans crammed together, even for just a few minutes while his staff sweeps the Pavilion, an airy drawing room and piano bar next to the pool.

Abandoning his mint tisane, Campbell Gray has leaped up from the white linen sofa to inch each hyacinth-blue cube apart until, once again, they are positioned just so. It's a pleasure to watch a perfectionist at work. Campbell Gray is best known for the refined urban sensibility he brought to One Aldwych in London; now he's bestowing the same rigorous polish on his first resort in the Caribbean. In his mania for excellence, he has test-driven 16 different pool chaises and had full-grown date palms barged down from Miami's Boynton nursery, rather than settling for immature local specimens. The neighboring mangrove, dotted with sun-bleached roots, resembles an art



Carlisle Bay, inside (right) and out. Below: Shrimp roti at Indigo on the Beach.



### CARLISLE BAY

#### BEST ROOM

**Suite 40, a top-floor three-bedroom with a wraparound deck overlooking the waterfront**

#### COCKTAIL SPECIAL

**Coconut-rum Indigo Charmer**

#### DON'T MISS

**The orchid lecture by gardener Hubert Martin**

#### FAIR WARNING

**Service can be slow**

installation: I suspect Campbell Gray of having tidied it up so elegantly.

Last year, when Campbell Gray assumed ownership of a half-built hotel project in Antigua's rain forest, he ripped out all vestiges of Caribbean kitsch and started again from scratch, with a pickled gray-on-blue-on-white scheme. At first sight, the 80 guest suites seem too subdued for the tropics (platform beds, bare tile floors, black-and-white photos); then you realize that the sneaky purpose is to draw your eye outside, to the blooming gardens and Crayola sea. On the vanilla-colored beach, the eager staff treats guests with watermelon slices and cold hand towels.

Since going on vacation doesn't have to mean shutting down your brain, Campbell Gray has elevated the beach read. In the all-glass library, a clever compendium of hardcovers—Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, Andrea Barrett's *Voyage of the Narwhal*—tests your literacy. Not surprisingly, Campbell Gray also has distinctive ideas about which books should wind up on the coffee table (*Legendary Yachts*, yes; *Nelson's Ships*, no). Evening entertainment is meticulously planned, as well. Stilted hotel managers' parties have been abolished here in favor of films in the 45-seat cinema, a twin to the original at One Aldwych. After lingering in the Pavilion bar to hear local jazz pianist Rawdon Edwards, I plop down in a blue Italian leather armchair in the Screening Room to catch Dooley Wilson tinkling "As Time Goes By" in *Casablanca*.

The real show takes place in the two restaurants. Hand-molded wax votives flicker on terrazzo tables at Indigo on the Beach. Since Campbell Gray is a healthy-living convert, the open-air bistro focuses on uncomplicated grills and organic salads. (At breakfast, the menu honors the West Indies with pumpkin fritters and pan-fried flying fish, a.k.a. Caribbean kippers.) At East, the resort's Asian dining room, burnished silver walls and peony-pink linen slipcovers balance an equally »