

Caribbean Islands: So Near and Yet So Far

by Betty Rogers

ANGUILLA

The island of Anguilla (ang-GWILL-a) was named for its eel shape and has 33 beautiful white sand beaches, crystal clear waters, extraordinary vistas and a contemporary international style. It also has more gourmet dining choices per acre than New York City. This is quite an accomplishment, considering the entire island is only half the size of Washington, D.C.

Anguilla is a British overseas territory, the most northerly of the Caribbean's Leeward Islands. It's noted for its spectacular and ecologically important coral reefs. In addition to the main island, the territory includes a number of tiny and mostly uninhabited islands and cays with names like Anguillita, Prickly Pear Cays, Seal Island and Sombrero. And let's not forget Dog Island, legendary home of the Anguilla Long Dogs. More about them later.

The island's capital is The Valley. About 13,000 people inhabit the 39 square miles of the island. English is the official language and boat-racing is the national sport. Eating must rank a close second: along with more than 70 dining establishments presided over by world-renowned international and award-winning local chefs, you'll find numerous roadside barbecues and beachside bistros and grills.

If you can tear yourself away from the eateries, there are gentle seas in varying shades of turquoise to swim in, soft white sand beaches to relax on, dolphins to frolic with, clear calm waters to snorkel and scuba, jazz and summer festivals to enjoy, yacht races and regattas to watch, wahoo, marlin and tuna to catch. You can even get married: Anguilla averages one church for every two square miles.

The island itself is mostly rock, its vegetation sparse, its soil and water limited. The constant trade winds force trees to remain low and oddly-shaped. But its beaches contain coral formations washed ashore intact and mysteriously beautiful. Since the island is very narrow at many points, you can often see both coasts while walking through the low bush along the shore. The Anguilla community is peaceful and joyous, known for its graciousness. And have we mentioned the food?

... And what about those Long Dogs? You can spot them all over Anguilla, especially in the eastern end of the island. They come in a variety of colors, some with long hair, some with short and some with a combination of both. Their common characteristic is that they're... long! Legend has it that they're descendants of a pirate captain's original long-backed canine, who busily repopulated the island (the dog, not the pirate) upon landing there after a shipwreck.

BARBUDA

Barbuda's beautiful, quiet atmosphere belies its bustling, turbulent past. One of the least-populated islands in the Caribbean, Barbuda holds the key to a natural, peaceful way of life. Many islands cater to those looking for entertainment like shopping, touring and casinos. Barbuda is for those looking for a place to slow down and make their own entertainment. With the deep blue Atlantic on one side and the clear teal Caribbean on the other, the island is perfect for swimming and beachcombing, for snorkeling and exploring the numerous wrecks submerged off its gorgeous coral reefs. It's also the perfect place to just laze around on powdery pink beaches. The most active inhabitants are the famous Frigate Birds, huge flying pirates that live on the northern edge of the island.

Barbuda is part of a three-island state with Antigua and Redonda in the northeastern Caribbean. Former British colonies, they were granted independence in 1981 but remain part of the Commonwealth. A flat coral island of only 68 square miles, Barbuda is about 30 miles north of Antigua. Its population of 1500 live mainly in Codrington, the island's capital and only town.

Village life is unaffected: visitors are welcomed into the local social life, treated as guests, not tourists. While there are several small guest cottages in town, there are only four hotels on the island. One, the exclusive K Club, is where Princess Diana spent several of her holidays.

Mostly rocky and flat, much of the island is covered in brush, with unmarked roads and tracks to the beaches. At 15 miles long and 8 miles wide, it's possible to bicycle almost as easily as drive, especially since, as the island's official website notes, speed is of no importance here.

It wasn't always this quiet. For a century Barbuda was a staging ground for a large slave population. Africans from Nigeria, Gambia, Ghana and Sierra Leone were transported to Barbuda before being sent to nearby Antigua and other eastern islands to work the sugarcane fields. This enterprise was the idea of Sir Christopher Codrington, an Englishman who was granted a 50-year lease of the island by King Charles II in 1680. The lease was later renewed by Queen Anne with the stipulation that the rent would be "one fat sheep yearly if demanded." Codrington and his brother John were also granted the rights to the wreckage from the many ships that were battered along Barbuda's reefs. Not surprisingly, they became the island's most prominent family.

Testament to their influence remains today in the island's place names and in its architectural remnants. Barbuda's highest point holds the ruins of Highland House, the Codrington estate, and their 56-foot high Martello castle and tower still sits on the south coast. This fortress was used both for defense and as a lookout point to spot shipwrecks on the outlying reefs. Fortunes were made – or augmented – by scavenging these wrecks.

Today, Barbuda is one of the very few islands in the Caribbean that remains so undeveloped it can seem positively deserted. But look closely: inland, you'll find all kinds of wildlife, including deer, boar, turtles and even the occasional wild cat. There are feral horses, donkeys and cattle, and in Codrington goats and sheep roam freely, returning docilely to their pens at night. There are several salt ponds where more than 170 species of birds can be spotted. Seaside, Barbuda's clear waters are home to a huge variety of marine life. All yours to observe and enjoy. You just have to slow down enough to see. Save that energy for some place where it's of importance.

... A word about the Frigates: *Fregata magnificens* have very short legs and small feet, so they can't walk or swim. They spend all of their time in the air or perched on shrub and tree limbs. They're also known as the man of war bird because, like flying warships, they use their superior size and flying ability to hijack slower flyers like pelicans, cormorants and egrets. One Frigate will harass its victim until it drops its catch, which is snatched up by another, lower-flying warship before it hits the water.

The male Frigate Bird has a red throat pouch that it inflates as a defensive display – as if the other birds haven't been terrorized enough – and as part of its courtship ritual. Courting takes place in the fall, and these huge Cassin's take it quite seriously. After making their nests, they blow up their fetching neck pouches and fly low until they spot unattached hens. Then they spring into action, flapping their outstretched wings, waving their heads back and forth and drumming their beaks. What girl could resist such a manly display?

BONAIRE

Imagine an island where the flamingo population is nearly double that of humans. An island where it's possible to spot 100 species of fish during one scuba expedition. Where all the surrounding waters have been part of a marine park since 1979, allowing you literally to walk off of the shore and onto a coral reef. Keep going 20 feet, and you're into coral forests. Actually, Bonaire isn't just surrounded by coral reefs: it *is* a reef, sitting on the dry, sunny top of an underwater mountain.

Bonaire is the *B* in what's known as the ABC Islands of the Netherlands Antilles: Aruba and Curaçao are its sisters. About 50 miles off the coast of Venezuela, Bonaire is the least developed

and least populated of the three. Like them, it's well outside of the hurricane belt. But while Bonaireans welcome visitors, they've made a conscious decision to step back and look at how change will impact their island and their lives. They take very, very good care of the uniquely beautiful place they call home. Commercial fishing isn't allowed in their waters; neither is the taking or destruction of any coral or other living or dead animal from the sea.

The island's arid climate means there's little rain fall. As a result, offshore waters are exceptionally clear of silt and calm year round. In addition to scuba and snorkeling, the island is rapidly developing a reputation as one of the best wind surfing destinations in the world. Its popularity rests on the 90% chance of favorable winds and the 100% assurance of the sheltered, shallow Lac Bay. Protected by the Bonaire Marine Park rules and regulations, Lac has beautiful turquoise water and is free from boat traffic, with plenty of room to enjoy the feel of your board slicing through the calm waters.

As careful as they are with their marine environment, Bonaireans are every bit as respectful of their land and its inhabitants. There are eight museums on Bonaire, giving testament to their pride of ancestry. Once widely populated by an assortment of herd animals imported by the Spanish, today there's a Sanctuary to protect the wild donkeys that remain. Nearly 200 species of birds inhabit the island. Even the iguanas are half-tame.

The name Bonaire is thought to have come from the island's original inhabitants, the Caiquetio tribe, whose word *Bonay* meant low country. The Spanish first claimed the island in 1499. Recognizing little of commercial value, they decided not to develop it. Instead, they enslaved the Caiquetios and moved them off to work on plantations, leaving Bonaire unpopulated.

The island remained a lonely outpost until 1526, when the Spanish began importing cattle, bringing back some of the Caiquetios and convicts from other colonies to act as laborers. In 1633, the Dutch took possession and Bonaire became a plantation island. The Dutch imported African slaves to harvest solar salt, which became the island's main resource. It was one commodity that Bonaire had in endless supply, but it took back-breaking labor to produce. Slave huts and laboriously-constructed salt pans are still scattered across the island as mute testimony to Bonaire's repressive beginnings.

The abolition of slavery in 1863 signaled an end of exploitation of those first Bonaireans and also of the salt industry. It took nearly a hundred years before the industry was revitalized, and it's now run by Cargill, one of the largest businesses in the world. Tourism was born when the island government constructed the first ship's pier in the small natural harbor. In 1943, the construction of a modern airport south of the capital city of *Kralendijk* made it easier for tourists to reach the island. The bright pink color of the airport pays homage to the island's signature birds.

The people of Bonaire are proud of what they've accomplished on land that was repeatedly abandoned as useless. Through hard work and careful stewardship, they've given their island a distinct character that's all its own. Today, more than 30 percent of visitors to Bonaire have been there before. Every Sunday, they join locals at Lac Bay to picnic, swim and dance to bands playing the island's irresistible music. When the shadows lengthen, they look up to see a line of bright pink flamingos heading toward South America for dinner. Bonaire is an environmentally progressive wonderland that knows how to have a good time. No wonder visitors come back.