

ANGUILLA THRILL

On this Eastern Caribbean delight, you'll find blissful bays, white sand, cool rhythms and warm welcomes. Just head to St. Martin and turn left

By Doug Wallace

Our little private pool overlooking Crocus Bay was just the right refreshing temperature; ditto the meltiness of the gin and tonics. And there would be time for another while we waited for the private chef we had hired for the night to work his magic in our glassed-in kitchen. When can I come back? I thought, already fast-forwarding to next time.

It turns out I'm not the only one in love with idyllic Anguilla. This British island just north of St. Martin/St. Maarten has one of the highest rates of repeat visitors in the Caribbean. And for good reason: the beaches are insane, the food is phenomenal, and the people are charming—a sun spot's triple threat. That the sub-tropical weather is a comfortable plateau of 27°—not too rainy, not too dry—lends further credence to my Goldilocks theory.

Sunshine aside, Anguilla, with its population of 14,000 spread over 90 square kilometres, also has just the right amount of semi-poshness: enough luxury to make it luxe, mixed with just enough normal to make it affordable. You can still drop an absolute ton of cash here, no problem, but you don't necessarily have to. Luxury resorts, cool villas, cozy cottages, guest houses—you'd be hard-pressed not to find something to suit your wallet.

Setting up camp at CeBlue Villas, we immediately took advantage of the wood-fired oven in the restaurant and ordered a pizza to go, snacking while unpacking. This gorgeous hillside resort sports five-bedroom homes, each with its own little pool, media room, kitted-out kitchen and gorgeous ocean view. It's far enough away

from it all to enjoy the serenity you've come all this way for, but just a few minute's drive from the heart of the island action. The beach is just down the hill a ways, complete with attendants, ample watercraft for those inclined, and Da'Vida, a cool beachfront restaurant whose waiters we kept busy for hours.

As mentioned, the opportunity for over-the-topping is there if you're looking. The Kelly Wearstler-designed Four Seasons Anguilla is beyond dazzling. Sunset at the Sunset Lounge couldn't be more special. People flock to this elegant waterfront bar overlooking the infinity pool at cocktail time to see how the other half lives, and to prime the night with the signature jalapeño margarita. The adjacent Cobà restaurant is superb. If you're pub-crawling, you can hit the lounge later in the evening for a nightcap and a spot of jazz.

Other top accommodation choices include the new Zemi Beach, a condo resort on the north end of the island on Shoal Bay; the elegant Malliouhana Resort on Long Bay, revamped within the last few years by designer Todd-Avery Lenahan; Cap Juluca on Maundays Bay at Anguilla's south end; and The Reef by CuisinArt, just down the road a little bit from its daddy, CuisinArt Golf Resort & Spa. The more down-to-earth Frangipani Beach Resort on Meads Bay is both authentic and friendly.

What to do, what to do...

Once you've settled where you're laying your head, hurry up and get relaxing. Just staring into the turquoise water from any of Anguilla's 33 white-sand beaches will melt your cares away.

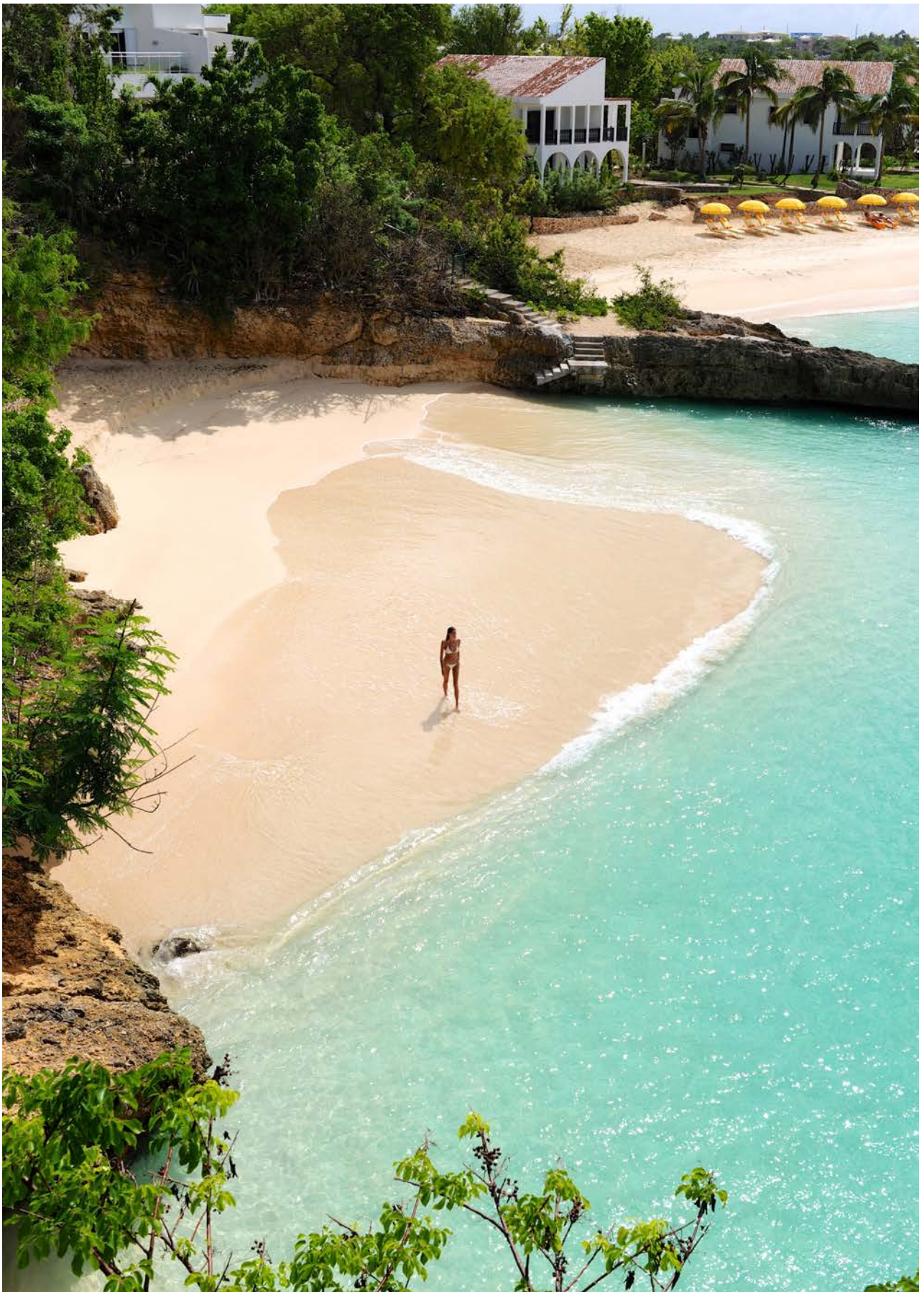


Photo: Malliouhana Resort



Photo: Four Seasons Sunset Lounge

Shoal Bay in particular is extolled as one of the best beaches in the world. If you ever tire of relaxing, you can easily occupy your time with deep-sea fishing, kite surfing, paddle boarding, kayaking and scuba diving. An afternoon sailing from bay to bay on the classic sailboat *Tradition*, or taking a powerboat adventure with Funtime Charters, are just two different types of cruise options to seek out.

Landlubbing adventures include golf, tennis, horseback riding and art-gallery hopping. Many choice craft boutiques and galleries dot the streets of The Valley and the West End. Cheddie Richardson's studio in Cove Bay will net you arresting driftwood pieces, stone sculptures and bronze casts, all inspired by nature. And the handmade jewellery, bright ceramics and sensual mahogany carvings at the Devonish Art Gallery are equally cool. You can get in touch with the island's cultural history at the new Fountain National Park, visiting the historic Amerindian Fountain Cavern at Shoal Bay East.

With 100 restaurants on the island, you'll never worry about where

your next meal is coming from. Crayfish is the local specialty, with lobster, snapper and mahi mahi rounding out the menus. All of the high-end resorts have beautiful restaurants, all worth the cash. The stand-alones—both high-end and street-side—have something special going for them, particularly Blanchards, where executive chef Melinda Blanchard not only spent time getting to know us, but also helping us decide on dessert. At affable Straw Hat Restaurant, the draw is the lionfish, a serious predator that restaurants across the Caribbean are being encouraged to start including on the menu. I stopped in with a gorgeous female friend, to be greeted by the waiter with, "First date?" Um, no.

Earmark Wednesday or Sunday for lunch on Scilly Cay, a tiny coral islet off the village of Island Harbour, reachable by a free, 10-minute boat ride. The whole island is a charming and rustic open-air restaurant run by Sandra and Eudoxie "Gorgeous" Wallace, who whip up Anguilla's deadliest rum punch, plus platters of barbecued lobster, snapper and chicken. We rode over with the band and all their equipment, pretending we were the go-go dancers, then spent the whole afternoon letting the punch



Photo: Doug Wallace

knock us flat on our backs, wallowing in the shallow waters on the soft sandbars, working on our tans and taking videos. (“Do you want to be in our video? It’s a gay video. Is that okay?”)

For our evenings out, we headed for the sound of live music, which is very much a part of the Anguillian culture. Locals and tourists lap up reggae, jazz and R&B bands almost every night at the many venues scattered around the island, including the Powerhouse, Johnno’s Beach Stop and the Dunes Preserve, owned by music icon Bankie Banx. Other acts to seek out include Banx’s son, super-hot cricket-champ-turned-reggae-star Omari Banks, as well as Natalie Richardson, Da Movements, True Intentions and Sproka. The talent per capita on this island is astonishing.

Back at CeBlue Villas, our bougainvillea-scented nights were capped off back in the pool with a skinny dip, as we planned the next day around our stomachs, and our next visit looking up at the stars.

When you go

Off-season (between May and August) is the best time to visit Anguilla; you’ll get prime deals and avoid the rains. Or you could time your visit to coincide with the 26th Annual Moonsplash Festival, where the legendary Bankie Banx welcomes musicians from around the world. It hits the Dune Preserve on Rendezvous Bay April 21 to 24. The Anguilla Summer Festival—the annual island twist-off of epic proportions—is held July 28 to August 7.

WestJet flies to St. Martin from two to five times a week from Toronto. Book Funtime Sea Shuttle in advance to get you from the airport to Anguilla via the 25-minute ferry, which runs daily from 8:15 am to 6:15 pm. You can also charter your own seven-minute flight on a Britten Norman Islander BN-2 with Anguilla Air Services (from \$665). The airport runway has been extended to cater to private jets, if you have one. Keep an eye out for Denzel Washington and Robert DeNiro (no, not together). Go to ivisitanguilla.com for more.