

An aerial photograph of a large number of sailboats of various sizes scattered across a vast expanse of clear, turquoise water. The boats are mostly white with blue accents. The water's clarity allows for some visibility of the seabed below. The overall scene is peaceful and idyllic, typical of a tropical sailing destination.

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HAVEN IT ALL

*Ian Henderson finds that Antigua is the
Caribbean's spiritual centre for yacht lovers
– and their children*



It's been said that if something floats or flies, you should rent it – advice which is disregarded by many a multimillionaire, to the relief of high-end boat and plane makers all over the world. Sales of G6 jets and Wally yachts seem to have survived most economic crises – and once you've bought them, of course you need somewhere to take them. The Med in summer and the Caribbean in the northern hemisphere's winter months beckon; both have ports and places to see and be seen, from film festivals to sailing regattas. Both have a spiritual centre: for the Mediterranean it's always been Cannes (although newcomers like Montenegro are coming up fast) and for the Caribbean it's arguably Antigua.

As an island, Antigua has it all: 365 beautiful beaches, an international airport with a decent runway, excellent stealth-wealth hideaway hotels, a relatively stable economy (with few extradition



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treaties) and some of the world's most thrilling sailing competitions. Here the most beautiful yachts ever created meet for April's Classic Week, followed closely by Antigua Sailing Week with a mix of vessels from carbon-fibre racing giants through to local dayboats. For the really determined there are even tougher events too, like the new RORC 600 offshore endurance race in February which begins and ends in Antigua's English Harbour.

But it's the two Antigua Weeks that, like most visitors, drew me to the island at Easter this year. I've done a bit of racing in the past, on modern offshore yachts and a restored 1946 keelboat, but I'd never done Antigua; and three children, most of whom have never shown much interest in boats, mean that nowadays sailing usually takes second place to school hockey matches. So as well as being determined to get out racing during our stay, I found what looked like the perfect place to get the whole family on the water – a new addition to Antigua's hotels called Nonsuch Bay.

Run by the Fraser brothers – both of whom grew up on the island and have forgotten more about Caribbean sailing than I'll ever know – the resort is at the head of a wide bay open to the steady trade winds blowing across the Atlantic but protected by a string of sandy islands and an almost unbroken coral reef. That is a recipe for perfect sailing, with solid breezes and flat, warm, postcard-perfect turquoise waters. There's a little dock, skilled instructors and plenty of boats to choose from – little learner dinghies through racing keelboats and catamarans to kitesurf boards. The bay is backed by architect-designed Caribbean-style villas, houses and apartments among indigenous gardens filled with hummingbirds. Above the dock is a modest restaurant with an infinity pool in the middle which overlooks the bay and offers some of the best cooking we found in Antigua. The lobster chowder is just perfect.

Solid breezes and a flat, warm, postcard-perfect turquoise sea – the recipe for perfect sailing. To my delight the children couldn't wait to get out on the water



ABOVE AND PREVIOUS PAGES: IMAGES © PHOTOLIBRARY

To my delight the children couldn't wait to get out on the water – not only had they spotted a couple of friends from home on the plane (so much more fun than sailing with Dad) but we'd also had a couple of relaxing days at the outstanding Carlisle Bay to get into the slower pace of island life. Carlisle Bay is a wonderful place – the rooms are as perfect as you'd expect from one of owner Gordon Campbell Gray's hotels and my wife would have happily traded anything to do with boats for more of the spa, tennis and idyllic beach. But going to Antigua and not sailing is like going to Gstaad and not skiing.

So Nonsuch Bay was just right; the kids quickly found a gang to hang with and we picnicked on beaches, swam with turtles and explored the mangrove-lined inlets and hidden reefs in speedboats and kayaks. The Bay is a popular anchorage for visiting yachts – Eric Clapton is a regular. We spotted *Velsboda* (possibly the most beautiful sailing yacht ever made) resting after her exertions in Classic Week and, tucked away round the corner, Silvio Berlusconi's amusingly named

PREVIOUS PAGE AND TOP: *English Harbour, an anchorage used by Nelson and still thriving today.* ABOVE: *the understated elegance of Carlisle Bay.* LEFT: *sailing with Dad*

RIGHT: sailing from Nonsuch Bay Hotel.
BELOW: the Inn at English Harbour

Shady decks with teak deckchairs lead across springy grass to the swimming pool and palm-lined beach where drinks and towels arrive unbidden at your driftwood-and-cotton hammock

Morning Glory. (Local lore has it that a nearby hilltop mansion is destined to be the Italian premier's retirement home – some smaller villas built on the property around it have already been waggishly dubbed the bunga-bungalows.)

For those who have chosen to ignore that earlier advice about plane and yacht ownership, the Fraser brothers are about to start building what may be the ideal hideaway in the Caribbean. A short drive (or 10 minutes by helicopter) from VC Bird airfield, a deep-water dock specially designed for megayachts is emerging from a diligent planning process. As well as hurricane-proof moorings it will offer state-of-the-art shore support and, for those who find even a 120-foot vessel too confining, a choice of villas built above the pretty mangrove-lined creek.

It was with some difficulty that I managed to persuade the family to leave Nonsuch and head across the island to English Harbour, the centre of the action, in time for the start of Sailing Week. We moved into the gem of a boutique



hotel that is the Inn at English Harbour – a place we'd stayed many years before and which has been sympathetically updated by owners Enzo and Susanna to retain its colonial charm. Set around small private courtyards, the rooms are generous and filled with artworks collected by Susanna on her travels, with voile-draped four-poster beds. Outside shady decks with teak deckchairs lead out across springy grass to the swimming pool and palm-lined beach where drinks and towels arrive unbidden at your driftwood-and-cotton hammock. Up above is the original stone-built bar and restaurant, where from the terrace you can see the masts of hundreds of yachts gathered in English Harbour – a port dating from Lord Nelson's time and still being used as it was first intended.

It was here that I was introduced to Hugo Stenbeck, Swedish-American sailing champion and part of the family that owns the hugely wealthy Kinnevik firm founded by his grandfather. As well as competing in the America's Cup and pretty much everything else, Hugo used to race the same class of yacht as our old Camper and Nicholson, an

*the heart
of Mayfair*



MEWS

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RIGHT: yachtsman
Hugo Stenbeck.
FAR RIGHT AND BELOW:
Genuine Risk and her crew



Antigua's like that – billionaires and beginners sail the same waters, rock stars and roaming sea-gypsies moor up alongside each other

International Six – although with considerably more success. Thrillingly, Hugo offered me a place during Race Week on his new racer, *Genuine Risk*, so the following morning I was heading down to Falmouth Harbour in a minivan with Hugo, his girlfriend and a couple of world-class sailors to join the 22-strong crew aboard one of the fastest racing sailboats anywhere. Trying hard to look casual, I followed them out of the minivan and along the dock. We were a little late but even so Hugo told the driver to drop us outside the gate to avoid any impression of looking like rockstars – although the mirror shades, pretty girls and actually being sailing royalty made that precaution fairly superfluous.

Genuine Risk was widely tipped as the boat to win Class 1, with its advanced canting-keel design and all-star crew (who between them had competed in pretty much every major sailing event including the Olympics and the America's Cup). The first race was close, but after that the boat quickly drew clear of the fleet during the week as wind strengths gradually built to almost gale force, with the carbon-fibre hull shrieking and planing above the waves as far back as the mast. Following us were a fleet of new Gunboat catamarans, a host of yachts

of all shapes and sizes, spectator boats and, madly, an ancient open fishing boat anchored right on the start line with three old boys registering defiance of the mayhem around them by casting for tuna in between knocking back bottles of local Wadadli beer.

Antigua's like that – billionaires and beginners sail the same waters, rock stars and roaming sea-gypsies moor up alongside each other. The island has kept its relaxed Caribbean charm without becoming simply a playground for the owners of planes and yachts. That may change of course, as hotels like Carlisle Bay, the Inn and Nonsuch Bay and events like Antigua Sailing Week attract more international visitors. I for one hope it doesn't happen too fast – and I fully intend to keep a close eye on things, starting with next year's Race Week. ■■

Antigua essentials: contact Carlisle Bay at www.campbellgrayhotels.com, the Inn at English Harbour at www.theinn.ag and Nonsuch Bay at www.nonsuchbayresort.com. Full details of the Antigua Sailing Weeks are at www.sailingweek.com (starts 29 April, 2012) and www.antiguaclassics.com (starts 19 April, 2012). The RORC 600 offshore race starts on 20 February, 2012 – details at www.caribbean600.rorc.org