

Paradise calls:
Dickenson Bay
— heavenly sand and
a big red reminder of
Antigua's colonial past

Easy does it

Antigua is undeniably the easiest island for wiped-out couples and young families. But you may be surprised just how quickly you slip into the languid groove, says Tamzin Reynolds

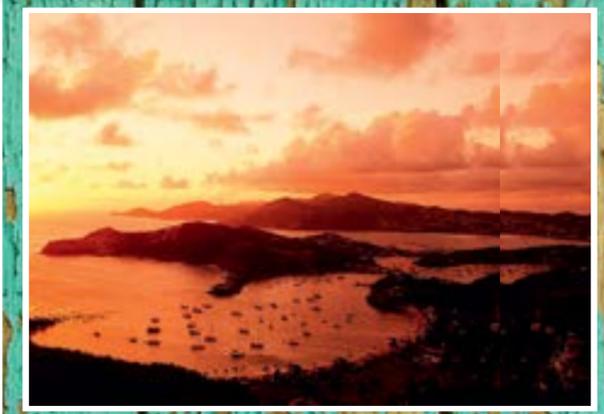
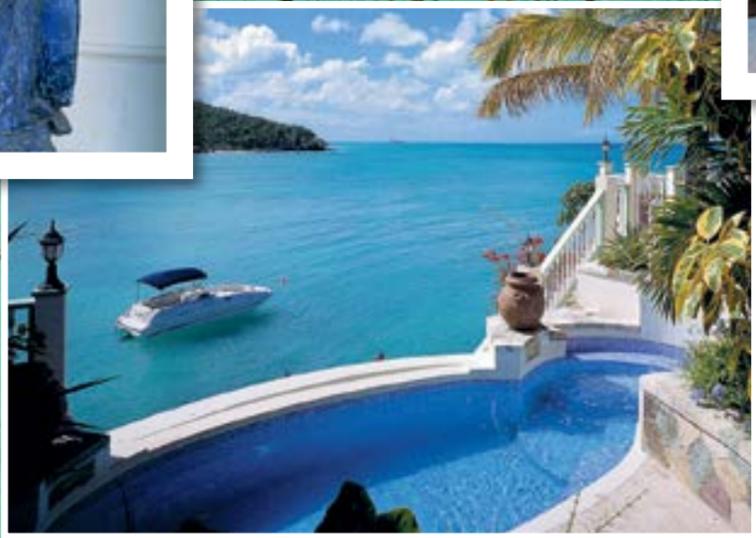
Twenty minutes into the taxi ride to Gatwick with my sister and her two small children, I have a feeling I've made a terrible mistake. The idea was to relax on tranquil beaches, and our choice of island, Antigua, has plenty — 365, the brochures allege ('one for every day of the year').

Trouble is, the littl'uns are already feral with boredom and there's an eight-hour flight to come.

'Long-haul' proves to be just that, but something strange happens when we land. We step out straight into a warm hug of air carrying the lilting strains of a steel band greeting passengers off the runway. In the airport, staff hand out cooling cups of fruit punch, encouraging just-landeds to take it easy. And that's Antigua in a nutshell. It's just so easy. The thick tropical heat soothes everyone — even cabin-fevered toddlers — to the point where just watching the hummingbirds flitting about the bougainvillea feels like an activity.

You arrive (via one of the shortest direct flights from the UK to the Caribbean) to find a beach-laden dollop of land, strewn with perfect oceanfront hotels. It's less





ANTIGUA Need to know

Spend This popular island has a bunch of hotels close to good beaches, so don't stress out over which stretch of sand to go for here — the joys of sun, sea and rum punch are universal. Packages are king, and hotel facilities and service are very family-oriented. But this is the island to go hunting for a deal — the best offers are usually found outside of the school holidays, when you can get a week all-inclusive from £799pp, including flights. Keep an eye on websites such as tropicalsky.co.uk and caribbeanwarehouse.co.uk for those £800 wonders. Otherwise, accommodation is as luxurious as you dare go: in January, a week at the four-star Galley Bay starts at £2,099pp, all-inclusive, including flights from Glasgow, through Hayes and Jarvis (01293 735831,

hayesandjarvis.com). In the Easter holidays, an all-inclusive week at five-star Blue Waters, flying from Gatwick, costs from £2,415 per adult, £955 per child with Caribtours (020 7751 0660, caribtours.co.uk).

Bask Antigua's weather is as reliable as its beaches. The climate follows the Caribbean norm, with the best weather from December to April, and hurricanes officially possible from June to November (but rare; the last major damage was in October 1999). If you go in summer, sea breezes usually keep the heat at bay.

Eat Beach bars, sunset barbecues and casual dining are the way to go on this laid-back island: at Shirley Heights (shirleyheightslookout.com), they've been holding a fantastically popular Sunday-night party for more than 30 years. If you're sightseeing in the capital, St John's, find the best spicy crab cakes at Hemingways Caribbean Cafe ([\[antigua.com\]\(http://antigua.com\); mains about £15\), while Harmony Hall, with its sweeping bay views, is a good Freetown stop on an island tour \(\[www.harmonyhallantigua.com\]\(http://www.harmonyhallantigua.com\); mains about £20\). In English Harbour, join the yachties tucking into West Indian curry at Trappas \(\[facebook.com/trappas\]\(http://facebook.com/trappas\); mains about £13\).](http://hemingway</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox=)

Flop Antigua's the chat-show host of the Caribbean — it gets on with everybody. All-inclusive, five-star, family-friendly, budget beach... it's all here. If you're a sailing nut, base yourself at English Harbour — the Admiral's Inn (admiralsantigua.com; doubles from £132, room only) is set inside Nelson's Dockyard. Dickenson Bay is a good choice if you like a lively beach scene, while families relish the more secluded Carlisle Bay (carlisle-bay.com; doubles from £375, B&B). Check the map — some hotels, such as Nonsuch Bay (nonsuchbayresort.com; doubles from £302, all-inclusive), can feel a bit isolated, while others, such as private-



island Rosewood Jumby Bay (rosewoodhotels.com; doubles from £879, all-inclusive, with transfers), for instance, are unashamedly fly-and-flop.

Explore If you stay on your sunlounger all week you won't miss anything bucket-list amazing, but it would be a shame. Antigua is only 18km by 22km, but feels bigger and you'll need a car to explore properly; hiring one is straightforward — Tropical Rentals (tropicalrentalsantigua.com) will deliver and pick up from your hotel. 4WD safaris and catamaran cruises will get you to the less-accessible spots, such as the unspoilt beach at Rendezvous Bay. There's also sister island Barbuda, quiet and low-lying, with a huge colony of frigate birds. Or take a day-trip by plane, ferry or helicopter to see the nearby island of Montserrat, the 'Pompeii of the Caribbean'.

Great for... Young families. Short flight time and transfers, plus slick all-inclusives (minus the enormous price tag) equals stress-free time with the brood.

Good for... Island-hopping. It's a major hub for travelling onto smaller paradise specks.

Bad for... The itchy-footed — get ready to know your hotel grounds very, very well.

In three words Fish and ships.



Blue horizons: play castaway at private island Jumby Bay; top right, Carlisle Bay

WORDS: NIGEL TISDALE

Editors' picks

Jacqui O's BeachHouse 'Don't be put off by the name; this lurching-and-loafing spot in the island's southwest has excellent French-Caribbean food, super cocktails and discreet cabanas on perfect sand (00 1 268 562 2218; mains about £15); Ed Grenby, Editor

Carlisle Bay 'Arguably Antigua's best hotel for the money, but definitely its best dining — and open to non-residents as long as it's not too busy (call first). Indigo does breezy grills/seafood, Ottimo! has poolside pizza and pasta, while East is posh pan-Asian (carlisle-bay.com; doubles from £375, B&B; mains about £21); Ed Grenby, Editor

developed, less glitzy than other Caribbean big hitters — ideal for camera-shy celebs such as Giorgio Armani, Eric Clapton and Oprah Winfrey, who come here to holiday unseen. Its cosseting feel works for families, too, we discover, thanks to the go-slow vibe, the steel-band barbecues, the dishes that sound like something from an Edward Lear poem: wahoo fish, soupy callaloo greens...

We quickly slide into comfortable sloth, lounging on the blonde lick of beach that trims our hotel, Blue Waters (bluewaters.net; doubles from £264, B&B), just 15 minutes from the airport and the capital, St John's (that's how easy Antigua is!). There's an old-fashioned warmth to this low-key stalwart, despite its infinity-pool glamour, that makes it particularly approachable. Down in the beach bar, wide-smiled Carolyn knocks up her famously punchy rum coolers, while the children paint shells and hunt for treasure in the kids' club's palm-shaded 'secret garden'.

When the outside beckons, it's just as simple to get around. Antigua's size (it would fit into Inner London) means nothing is more than a 40-minute drive away, through dripping rainforest or sleepy villages of sorbet-coloured clapboard cottages. For a peek into its past, we head to Nelson's Dockyard, the old naval base at English Harbour, now restored in the style Horatio himself would have known it when he was posted here in the 1780s (though presumably without the armada of glossy super-yachts).

Next day, we hire our own boat, and glide down the coast, past Armani's discreet cliff-top villa and a ticker tape of

custard-coloured beaches. The rumble of little tummies prompts us to anchor offshore below Sheer Rocks restaurant, in water so clear we can make out fish scales. It hangs off the cliff like an old wooden ship, white drapes billowing like sails. The children wolf down slices of Tuscan pan-fried pizza, then scarpers for a splash in the plunge pool, leaving us to dive into a laid-back feast of Caribbean tapas — spicy shrimp, tempura pumpkin flowers and sautéed garlic lobster.

A week slides by in a blur of cocktails, stacks of magazines and joyful paddling. Our flight back home looming, we pack and head down the road for a last lazy lunch at Cecilia's High Point Café, a whitewashed Creole beach cottage just moments from the airport. As we sit on the veranda, its eponymous Swedish owner, a former Helmut Newton muse, sashays between the tables with chalkboard menus. Photos from her modelling days adorn the walls inside, where the chef sizzles up classy Caribbean and Scandinavian fare — homemade gravlax on potato pancake, curried shrimp with fresh mango salsa... After our 'drunken' raisin ice cream (Nutella crêpes for the children), we eke out the remaining time before leaving for the airport on the beach below, the litt'uns shaping a few last castles in the sand. It's every bit as soothing as the rest of the week — warmed by golden rays, it's impossible to believe we'll be high in the sky in just an hour or two. Antigua's tag line is 'the beach is just the beginning'. But for us, it's the perfect end.