

Sitting pretty: doing nothing is an acceptable activity on the white sands of hotel Cap Juluca. Opposite, lean, mean modernity at super-resort Viceroy Anguilla



Hide and chic

They say Abramovich is there – somewhere – but starry Anguilla is all about low profiles. **Nick Redman** falls for its local heroes instead

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JOE SCHMELZER**

Fingers, flesh and lower-arm bones: it was clearly the leftovers of a grown man or woman. I winced, then drew closer to the photo, stuck on the wall of Anguilla's tiny Heritage Collection Museum. The caption told the tale in disaster-movie detail...

The belly of a 90kg monster tiger shark – 'caught some two miles off Forest Bay on Anguilla's south coast by Germaine Gumbs on 29 March 2001' – had spilt those grisly remains. 'The human arm shown here was found in its intestines.' Revulsion collided with compulsion – I had to know more. Theory has it, a boat was passing Anguilla en route to the US Virgin Islands around the time of the catch, loaded with Haitian stowaways. Only one thing's certain: if the story were made into a French disaster movie, the end would read 'FIN'.

Arguably, whoever it was got off lightly – Anguilla costs most people an arm *and* a leg. A slick of sandy cream amid the Leeward Islands chain, it's among the most rarefied specks in the Caribbean. In many ways, you're paying for what you don't get: just 25km by five, this is a luxury place that still feels local, from the low-rise, dusty-grid capital, The Valley, to the blistered fishing boats at Island Harbour, to the shoes-off lobster lunch at Palm Grove Bar & Grill, all white plastic tables and chairs beside the wilderness strand of Junks Hole. Sunbather count: just one.

Anguilla is so laid-back it's horizontal, only more so – in fact it may well be in a yogic crab position. And despite the (very) odd alarmist shark tale, it's so safe that superstars circulate with comfy anonymity. (Sample expression of islander indifference: 'Paul McCartney? Is he a movie star? I don't know these people.') Waves can scarcely be bothered to leave their neon-blue millpond bays and flop ashore, and road traffic is nearly non-existent – in the highly-unlikely event of a head-on collision while out driving, you can be sure the goat will come off worse.

I wouldn't call getting to Anguilla a sedative experience, which may be what keeps the numbers down: the half-hour connecting flight from Antigua can be utterly unnerving, fluttering in on a moth-plane that, when the thermals play up, feels attached to the fingers of God by a rubber band. Then again, you remind yourself, as Air Balsawood wobbles in a last attempt to line up with the tarmac, you didn't choose Anguilla for familiar exotic.

Two of us came for a week and found it quite the opposite. So rare and empty; so vivid it stays in my mind's Flickr, low-lying and scrubby: porch-fronted bungalows in sorbet shades on the road to Sandy Ground; waysides of oleander and mimosa on the looping return; strange St Gerard's Roman Catholic Church, built seemingly entirely from pebbles, like a little temple by Tolkien. And Caribbean horizons everywhere, beyond bleached beaches.

When we checked in at Cap Juluca resort, on Maunday's Bay, we couldn't believe the setting. The glaring sands were pepper-soft and tide-ribbed, like the surface of another world; the blue sea had a dark iris-rim for a horizon; the seashells might have been made by Wedgwood: pure, porcelain, pale. I began gathering them in earnest on the first-morning's walk to the beach shack for breakfast. Realising the limitless supply, before long I was getting picky in paradise, casting even the faintly-flawed back on the shore.

Like Anguilla itself, Cap Juluca is all about the beach – part calm, part catwalk, set against a backdrop of St Martin, a peaked charcoal smudge on the horizon. That afternoon, settled in, we watched a guest come by, as bronzed and angular as a Giacometti sculpture in a bikini, only possibly older. Soon passed a mum so slim through her floaty turquoise ensemble that she was a human butterfly when the wind caught it. A boat moored: Armani's.

The hotel is supermodel stuff, with the North African domes of its white villas repeating themselves into the distant heat haze. It >



Notes from a small island: clockwise from top left, the reggae star Bankie Banx tunes up at Dune Preserve; St Gerard's Roman Catholic Church appears to be made entirely of pebbles; Una Gumbs, who runs relaxed restaurant Smokey's at the Cove; dinner at Veya, Sandy Ground,

feels like an enchanted evening in a designer tropical treehouse; the sun sets over Maunday's Bay, as seen from Cap Juluca resort; morning yoga with a blue view at Viceroy Anguilla; the only thing the bus is likely to encounter on the empty roads is a goat; sail on the horizon at Meads Bay



Fresh and wild: grilled lobster, ginger red snapper and boozy bracers – just another January Saturday at Smokey's at the Cove



looks like a string of space observatories edging the otherworldly sands. Built in the MTV mid-'80s, it was rock-star big in its heyday. ('Foreigners used to think Cap Juluca was the island, and Anguilla a resort,' one of the staff remembered, depositing drinks.) As more-megawatt properties have materialised, time has gently relegated it – the Moroccan-souk touches (lanterns, Moorish arches) feel nostalgic, while the marbled bathrooms suggest sets from a classic Imperial Leather ad. Yet three days here told us all we needed to know about life on Anguilla: doing nothing is a perfectly-respectable activity.

We tried to resist – in that 'let's-see-what-this-place-is-all-about' first holiday flush, before honest torpor set in. That night, we drank at Dune Preserve, a music spot on splendid Rendezvous Bay – ideal immersion therapy, very unmanicured, very thrown-together. They say bits have been carried off by hurricanes; in fact it looks as if it's been *styled* by hurricanes – boat for a bar, tables hobbling in the sand, candles on tables in storm lamps. Everyone's at Dune Preserve to listen to the resident fixture Bankie Banx, a

Windies superstar who looks ravishingly unkempt, like a pirate. Bankie's having a warm-up strum at 10.15pm, adjusting his fixed harmonica like a Cari-Bob Dylan. Beside a pic of his old self, posing with a guitar, he took us into the late hours, repeatedly surprising, with operatic flashes, yet smooth, unselfconscious: a recording legend happy to perform on a wooden pallet.

With pulses slowed to reggae pace, next day we went exploring and found the Heritage Collection Museum, out at deserted East End Pond: 'A peek into Anguilla's past'. In the grounds: an oddly riveting cast-iron boiling pot, rusted to a crisp, made in the 18th century, when Anguilla was a sugar-producing British colony. 'This was my bedroom in the 1960s,' said proud Colville Petty OBE, guiding us – the silver-bearded museum-founder grew up in the building. His collection (passion) tells the whole island story in six rooms, starting with those dawn-of-history inhabitants the Arawaks (circa 2,000BC), from the Orinoco region of South America; via colonial sugar, British paratroopers and Bobbies on

the beat during 1960s' independence struggles; to modernity: the coming of electricity in the '70s, and international direct dialling, introduced in 1986. Well into the '50s, housewives were using sea fans to sift flour, and the dried skin of the triggerfish to scour pans. 'If you had a gas lamp,' said Petty, beside a display of appliances ferrous with age, 'you were really somebody.'

The luxury island that still feels local: Una Gumbs, who runs our next-day lunch rendezvous, Smokey's at the Cove, remembers visiting from New Jersey in 1956 with her father, who'd emigrated to the US two decades previously to become a dentist. No plumbing, no infrastructure. 'Why would you want to bring your American wife and kids to this godforsaken place?' wrote his sister from Anguilla when he told her he was returning.

She sent a fishing boat to collect them all from St Martin but the engine stopped working so they took an age to sail here. 'Still, when we arrived, we thought it was paradise,' says Gumbs. 'More so than it is now.' From where we're sitting on this beltingly blue

January Saturday, Cove Bay resembles perfection. The waitress sings along to the punchy live reggae by The Musical Brothers as she brings the Carib beers. Couples take snaps of their cocktails, presumably to use as screensavers back in midwinter Manhattan.

This being Anguilla, the food is simple but sensational, and you fork out the lobster in great glistening twists, having doused it in lemon butter. The shovel-down rice and squishy pigeon peas mingle with stray currants from the coleslaw, sweet and jewelled. The mahi-mahi fish fingers are, we agree, the star, barely breaded and full of dark and white flesh that feels almost meaty. Una encapsulates the island ethos: 24-carat yet down-to-earth, with a welcome that hasn't been drilled in, five-star-hospitality style.

You'd be harder-pressed to say the same of our next hotel, Viceroy Anguilla, a big-smile American brand, with a resort team including a 'vibe manager' (someone to be professionally nice to newcomers, I think) and an impressive programme of fitness classes (120 had been scheduled for the recent festive period). Which isn't to say it >

Heaven and hull: small boats, soft sands and solitude at Meads Bay



isn't a stunner – Anguilla's latest check-in, which landed in late 2009, wows with its lean, mean, slabby modernity, five restaurants (including Lebanese), three pools and guest list that has featured Sir Paul and partner. The Sunset Lounge is mesmeric – right on the headland between Meads and Barnes Bays, overlooking skies the colour of your Campari. After dark, mega-yachts in the sea, including Abramovich's, turn on surreal skirts of sub-aquatic blue lights that lend them the look of interplanetary craft.

There's something introspective, hermetically-sealed about the place – a bold departure architecturally for Anguilla, where living space usually merges naturally with island life. And it's Miami-core-muscular – trimmed of fat – rather than Caribbean-curvy. Guests were seriously sunglasses, motionless at the infinity pool. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't seduced by the echoes of Frank Lloyd Wright in the barely-there architecture – all sea and sky, nothing as vulgar as a primary colour. And the poolside cabanas? A boon for when love handles threatened to reappear after the last night's dinner.

Shrugging off the shrink-wrap sensation, we ventured out to Veya restaurant, in Sandy Ground. Relief. With its refreshing stone tones and wraparound veranda, it felt like dining in a tropical treehouse. Anguilla drifted in with chirps and breezes, and although we came to eat *à deux* we ended up new-best-friends with the hypnotically-relaxed owners, husband and wife Jerry and Carrie Bogar. The two

restaurateurs rolled up from Pennsylvania six years ago ('We did a Google search – "Caribbean restaurant for sale" – and Veya popped up') and work magic with what the local fishermen drop off – memorably a sautéed red snapper, which came generously piled on basil mashed potato, with coriander, mint and avocado.

Even this was busy by comparison with the ultimate relaxation station: Scilly Cay, a flat outcrop just off the north coast, home to a special grill. You need to be as slow as tortoises on rum to appreciate it because, once the small boat transfer has made the four-minute voyage from Island Harbour, there's really nothing to do but eat. For 25 years the no-shoes sandy islet, edged with sea walls of pink conch shells, has been run by Sandra – very Texan beauty queen – and her husband, Anguilla-born Eudoxie, who is cop-series tough-talking and rapid-fire funny...

'Where you from?' he asked. 'London?' Never heard of it...' Alas we had, and ahead it loomed – but for a last afternoon the menu proposed crayfish, spiny lobster, chicken, fish and island-drowsing. When the time came to head back to shore, I wondered if I might swim it. (It's not unknown for guests to breaststroke back in their beach gear.) But clouds sailing above cast ominous moving shadows on the waters, and a breeze whipped the surface into the occasional triangular crest. Better to do it the Anguilla way. I sat back in the boat, put my feet up, and let it flow. ■

Get me there

WHEN TO GO

Temperatures don't drop much below 23°/24°C in winter, rising to 29°C in summer, and rainfall is a mere 89cm or so a year. Peak season is Dec-Jan, when room rates are highest; they sink from mid-April and the weather is pleasant on into June. The hurricane season (Jul-Nov) has its risks – so keep your eye on meteorological websites.

GO INDEPENDENT

There are no direct flights to Anguilla from the UK. **BA** (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) operates daily to Antigua from £840 return (includes the 35-minute Anguilla connections with LIAT). Also from Gatwick, **Virgin Atlantic** (0844 209 2770, www.virgin-atlantic.com) flies to Antigua (Wednesday, Friday, Saturday) from £644 return; for onward flights, **LIAT** (00 1 264 497 5000, www.liatairline.com) connects to Anguilla from £194 return. Or charter **Anguilla Air Services** (00 1 264 498 5922, www.anguillaairservices.com) for £129pp one-way (based on nine sharing); also try **Trans Anguilla Airways** (00 1 264 497 8690, www.transanguilla.com) – from £100pp (eight sharing).

WHERE TO STAY

Cap Juluca (00 1 264 497 6666, www.capjuluca.com) has Ocean-

View doubles from £746, B&B, a night, peak season (£375 Jun-Oct). **Viceroy Anguilla** (00 1 264 497 7000, www.viceroyanguilla.com) starts at £714 a night for a garden-view room, no meals (£470 Apr-Oct). Much cheaper, even in high season, are Anguilla's simpler properties (all rates doubles, some meals): try **Anguilla Great House** (00 1 264 497 6061, www.anguillagreathouse.com; from £215), on Rendezvous Bay; or **Anacaona Boutique Hotel** (00 1 264 497 6827, www.anacaona.hotel.com; from £180), at Meads Bay. Sunshine-yellow **Lloyds Bed & Breakfast** (00 1 264 497 2351, www.lloyds.ai), in The Valley, costs from £91 – alas, no beach.

STOPOVER IN ANTIGUA

For special-occasion luxury, five-star **Jumby Bay Resort** (00 800 8767 3966, www.jumbybayresort.com) is a 20-minute drive from the airport, on its own islet. Peak-season doubles start at £1,130 a night, with all meals (£755 in June). Cheaper, but still airport-friendly, is four-star-plus **Blue Waters** (0870 360 1245, www.bluewaters.net); peak-season doubles from £327, B&B (£280, Jun-Oct).

GO PACKAGED

Elegant Resorts (01244 897515, www.elegantresorts.co.uk) can sort six nights in Anguilla (three at



Cap Juluca, three at the Viceroy, both B&B) and four in Antigua at Jumby Bay (all-in) from £4,460pp, with BA flights from Gatwick and LIAT connections. Alternatively, 10 nights split between the Anguilla properties – with no Antigua stopover – costs £3,185pp, B&B, with flights. **SJ Villas** (020 7801 4010, www.sjvillas.co.uk) offers five-suite Villa Mystique, on Maunday's Bay, with stunning views from a roof deck; seven nights (Jan-Mar) £2,573pp (no meals or flights) based on 10 sharing, with concierge service.

RESTAURANTS AND BARS

Smokey's at the Cove (00 1 264 497 6582, www.smokeysatthecove.com); mains around £10. **Veya** (00 1 264 498 8392, www.veya-axa.com); around £18. **Scilly Cay** (00 1 264 497 5123, www.scillycayanguilla.com); lunch £22.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Heritage Collection Museum (00 1 264 497 4092) entry £3.15 (under-12s £1.90). Departure tax (£12.50), under-12s exempt. See **www.ivotanguilla.com** for hotels, beaches and island living.

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