



Caribbean Cream

Rumour has it that the Caribbean nation of Antigua boasts 365 beaches, one for each day of the year. Giselle Whiteaker picks out a favourite.



A Bali Bed on the beach

The cobalt ocean laps the bright, white, sandy shore and a yellow catamaran glides through the water as my mother Judy and I sit with welcome drinks in hand in the open lounge area of Keyonna Beach Resort on the south-western coast of Antigua. It's our first time to the Caribbean and we're ready to kick off our shoes and soak up some sun on one of the island's 365 beaches. The spiced rum in the Old Fashioned is firming this resolve.

We're soon settled in to our spacious, rustic yet luxurious cottage, complete with a private outdoor shower and a deck that looks over an expanse of lawn, dotted with strutting ibises, to the beach. Changing into our swimwear, we wander along a path lined with brightly hued hibiscus to the beach, tiny, intricately patterned lizards darting into the undergrowth away from our steps. Normally on holiday we are constantly on the go, but the baking heat and the lure of the crystal-clear water is lulling us into languor. This is a good thing.

On the beach we claim a Bali bed and draw back the curtains to allow the sun in to our secluded enclave. Within moments, one of Keyonna's "beach boys" takes our drink order, promptly delivering two deliciously icy mango smoothies. All afternoon we dip in and out of the water, settling into the rhythm of island life. Unlike the bustle of the city, there's a laid-back air here. There's no pressure to do or see anything, although the bus to St John stops outside the front gate. Here, though, there are plenty of beach reads on the bookshelf in the lounge and should we tire of the sea, there's a pool to dip our toes in. It's only as the

day fades that we exert any kind of effort, drifting back to our cottage to change for dinner.

A singer is crooning tunes with a distinct reggae undertone in the restaurant, at the rear of the multi-tiered, open-air wooden terrace. Keyonna is all-inclusive, and the evening menu, which changes daily, is an eclectic mix of West Indian cuisine and fresh local seafood, served with a selection of wines from the sommelier and a beaming smile. Dishes range from a warm goat cheese tart to Cades Reef Conch salad, grilled fillet of Mahi Mahi, and fresh tomato, sausage and Pecorino pasta, followed by exotic desserts such as guava crumble and key lime meringue pie. The one thing they share is an abundance of flavour. "I could get used to this," Judy sighs in satisfaction at the end of our meal.

The days merge into a sun-fuelled daze, starting with breakfast by the sea, cheeky



Cottage balcony

Antillean finches swooping past to collect our crumbs. The closest we get to active is a morning yoga session, led by a yogi wearing a shirt made from a coffee sack. Our beach time is bracketed by meals and we get to know the friendly staff by name. "Should we perhaps see something of Antigua?" I ask Judy one afternoon as we laze on our Bali bed. "Mmm," is the non-committal reply. "Tomorrow," I declare, and with the help of the concierge, I book an excursion to Stingray City.

Located on the north-eastern coast of Antigua, Stingray City is not, in fact, a city. Our driver trundles us through villages filled with brightly painted cottages before



A bali bed on beach at night

depositing us in what looks like a bird sanctuary. Cages dot the lawn, with exotic birds from across the world chirruping a welcome – or calling out “hello” in the case of the Australian cockatoos. There’s even an iguana that blinks out a greeting, remaining motionless on its perch.

A small crowd gathers in clusters around picnic tables and we are given a briefing for our stingray adventure. “You’ll be fine,” I say, patting my mother’s arm in reassurance when I see a flicker of nervousness scroll across her face.

After a brief but bumpy speedboat ride, we pull up next to a sandy cay, the shallow water a translucent aquamarine. From the wooden pier, we can see the dark outlines of the Southern Rays as they skim across the bottom. One by one, we slip into the waist-deep water, carefully shuffling our feet to avoid being unwittingly barbed by the magnificent creatures. Contrary to popular belief since the unfortunate demise of Steve Irwin, Crocodile Hunter, stingrays are placid creatures. The barb on their tails is a defensive mechanism, rather than an offensive weapon.

“Oooh,” Judy and I utter simultaneously, as rubbery wings swipe along our calves. The curious creatures surround us, knowing that there will be some squid tidbits on offer. The

guides seek out their favourites, which nestle gently in their arms near the surface of the water, slipping away when they’ve had enough. We each have the opportunity to get up close and personal with a ray, cradling them like babies, feeding them from our hands, and donning masks and snorkels to observe their underwater antics. This was well-worth leaving the Bali bed for.

Back at the hotel, I’m still marvelling at the rays when I wander to the pool after dark for an outdoor massage. Our multi-talented yogi guides me to the massage table set up on a shallow platform in the pool, surrounded by candles. As he gently manipulates my muscles in the balmy night air, scented naturally by tropical blooms, I realise that the usual tension in my shoulders is absent. That’s the gift of Keyonna Beach Resort: barefoot relaxation at its finest. It’s the cream of the Caribbean crop. ■

In addition to relaxing beach stays, Keyonna Beach Resort has launched photography courses for beginners and improvers.

For more information or to book your stay at Keyonna Beach Resort, see www.keyonnabeachresortantigua.com



Cottage plunge pool



A room at Keyonna Beach Resort