

And the
STARS
Fell on
ANGUILLA

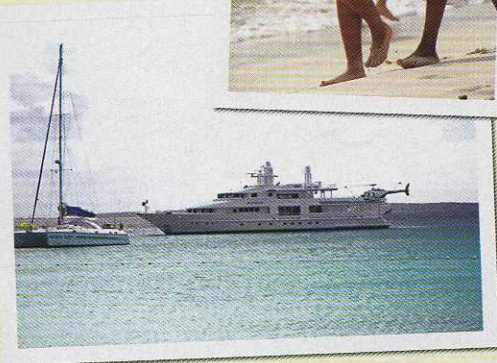
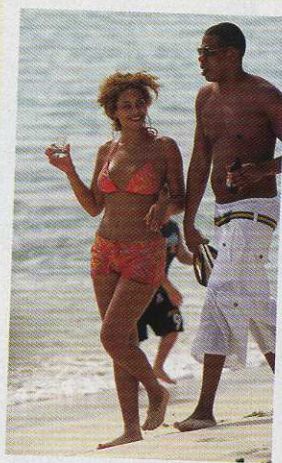
It's flat and scrubby, dotted with scrawny goats and salt ponds. But Anguilla has unrivaled beaches, a history of good race relations, and restrained development (at least for now), all of which have transformed it into the Caribbean

getaway
of choice.

SUSAN
HACK

swims

with the stars



Photographs by
MELANIE ACEVEDO

I PRESS MY FACE TO THE WINDOW OF THE tiny plane as we bank toward a yellow-brown smudge in the brilliant blue palette that is the Caribbean Sea. Five minutes ago, we were on St. Barts, the Caribbean St-Tropez, all green hills and red-tiled houses and designer boutiques. Anguilla, just below us, couldn't look more different: Flat and scrubby, crisscrossed by dirt roads, dotted with sulfurous salt ponds, and wandered by goats, it's so arid that hotel palm trees have to be imported from its other hilly neighbor, the cruise ship port and duty-free shopping mecca of St. Martin. "It doesn't look like much," a fellow passenger, a blond man wearing a lime-green seersucker shorts suit, reassures me as the plane lands, "but I promise, Anguilla is one trendy little island."

It wasn't always. Sixteen miles long and three miles at its widest, Anguilla, a British dependency, is the most northerly of the Leeward Islands, which curve like a crustacean's tail between Puerto Rico and Venezuela, on the eastern edge of the Caribbean Sea. Millions of years ago, it was covered in tropical forest and inhabited by giant rats. By 1650, when the first Europeans arrived to build sugar, coffee, and cotton plantations, the island had become dry and brushy. By the end of the eighteenth century, the living conditions were so harsh that Britain ordered its colonists to abandon the eel-shaped rock.

But one century's hellhole is another's paradise. It may lack colonial great houses and exotic vegetation, but in the last twenty-five years Anguilla has become an under-the-radar destination whose low-key appeal—thirty-three wild beaches and twelve thousand friendly citizens whose Caribbean-wide reputation for harmonious race relations is a by-product of the island's historical lack of large plantations—contrasts starkly with tourist-clogged Barbados and the rougher enclaves of Jamaica's Kingston. On An-

Anguilla's HARMONIOUS RACE RELATIONS are a by-product of its lack of large plantations

guilla, crime is so rare that one of the most luxurious hotels, Cap Juluca, has dispensed with room keys.

The Anguillan idyll is not a coincidence, though, but the result of careful planning. To protect the island's beaches and churchgoing local culture, the government banned big cruise ships, high-rise hotels, casinos, and topless bathing. This focus on clean living and low-impact, high-end tourism has made Anguilla one of the more stable and prosperous Caribbean islands, with nearly full employment for locals, little need for foreign labor, and none of the aggressive itinerant postcard and trinket vendors who hassle visitors and pollute beautiful beaches



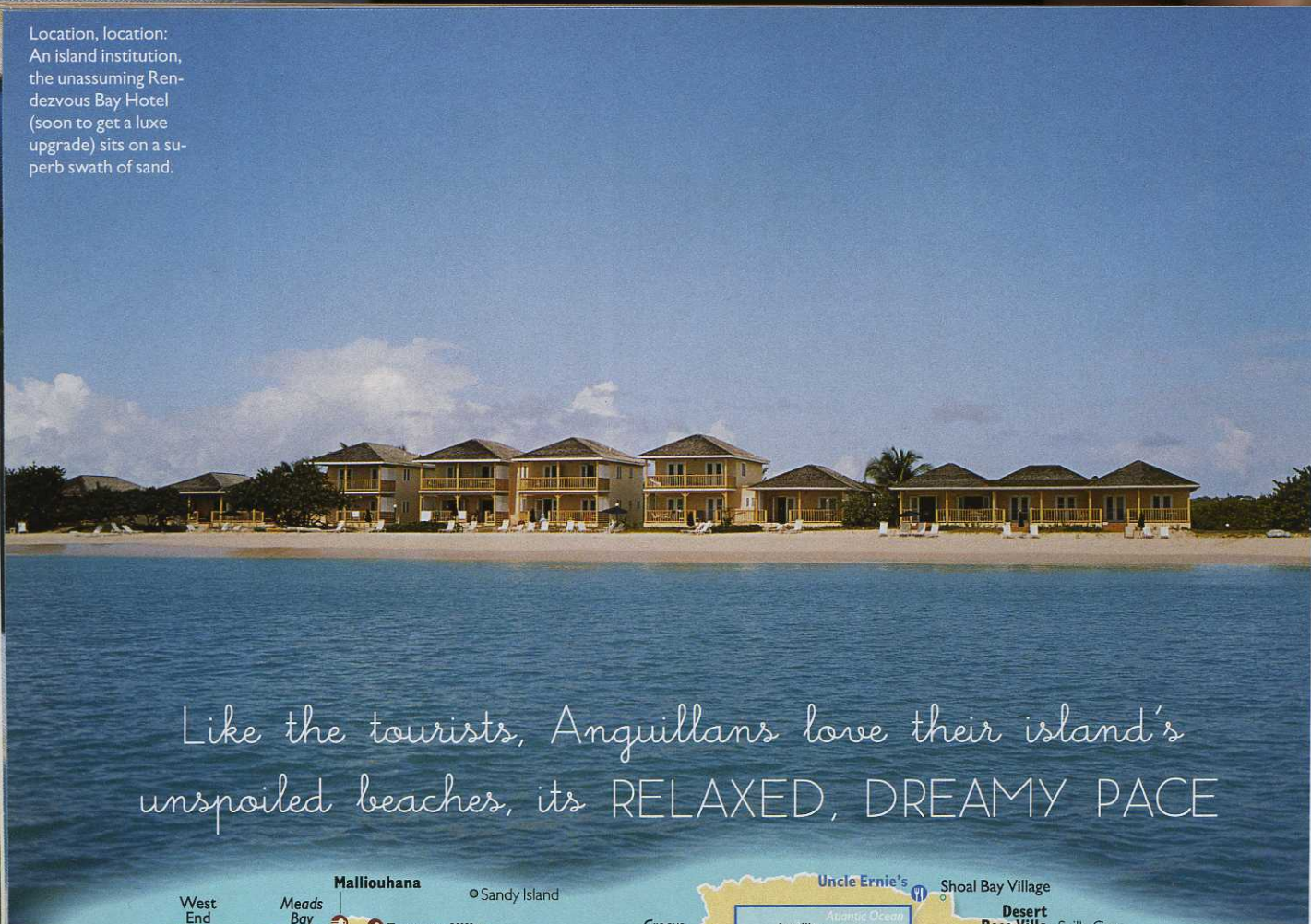
Fruits of the sea: A crayfish feast at Uncle Ernie's in Shoal Bay East. A family-style dinner at the aptly named Rendezvous Bay Hotel (below), where faithful guests have been returning for years.



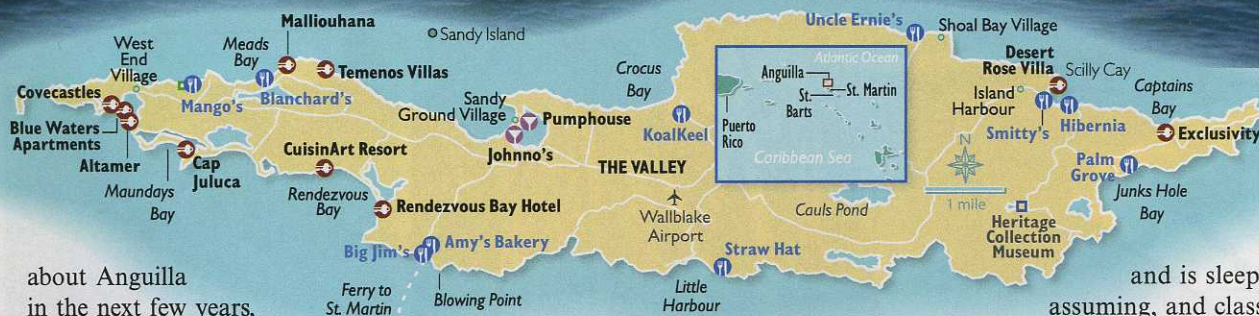
worldwide. Privacy-seekers flock here, and at least one upscale restaurant, Hibernia, has a guest book bearing the signatures of Robert De Niro, Richard Gere, Dustin Hoffman, Quincy Jones, Kevin Bacon, and Susan Sarandon, among others. You'd think that kind of traffic would turn Anguilla into a snob fest, but the local residents remain remarkably unstarstruck. Celebrities are treated like anyone else. As "What We Do in Anguilla," the official tourist guide, puts it, locals take pride in helping guests "feel free to be themselves for a short while and not the jerk on the job that he or she sometimes have to be."

Celebrity sightings aside, you'll be hearing more

Location, location: An island institution, the unassuming Rendezvous Bay Hotel (soon to get a luxe upgrade) sits on a superb swath of sand.



Like the tourists, Anguillans love their island's unspoiled beaches, its RELAXED, DREAMY PACE



about Anguilla in the next few years, as its government, which is facing a critical phase in the country's development, proceeds with its controversial plans to raise the island's profile. The airport runway was expanded last January to handle private jets that previously had to drop clients on St. Martin, a thirty-minute ferry ride away, but it is still too small for large commercial aircraft. Three new resorts, a mega-yacht port (to accommodate ships like Oracle CEO Larry Ellison's 425-foot *Rising Sun*), and two PGA-caliber golf courses loom on Anguilla's luxury horizon. Shortly after my March visit, the government approved plans for the biggest construction project yet, a low-rise 2,083-room resort consisting of hotel rooms, condos, and villas that will occupy 475 acres on the previously undeveloped East End. The project seems to break the long-standing local ban on hotels of more than a hundred rooms, and it encapsulates Anguilla's current dilemma: how to compete with escalating luxury development on other islands without compromising the open spaces and matter-of-fact, barefoot charm that lie at the heart of the island's appeal.

I'M STAYING ON THE CALM WEST COAST, AT THE Rendezvous Bay Hotel and Villas, which opened in 1962

PLACES & PRICES

On Anguilla, there's a hotel for every taste, from high-flying to low-lying. For details, see page 200.

and is sleepy, unassuming, and classically Anguillian. From my pitched-roof villa, wooden steps lead directly onto white sand. A little farther back, a motel-like wing of smaller rooms has a veranda facing a garden of aloe and white cedars with two rusting colonial-era cannons. Most of the guests have been coming here for years. Over a dinner of parrot fish with ginnip fruit sauce, they discuss what passes for news on Anguilla: the exploits of Greenacres, the resort's freakishly intelligent parrot; the fact that Big Jim's, the village pub at Blowing Point Ferry, is serving goat water instead of bull foot soup; and the latest celebrity sighting (John Malkovich). At the Rendezvous, the tap water sometimes runs brown, the shutters are loose, and the walls are whisper-thin, but the regulars, who can afford to pay much more than the hotel's \$130-a-night rate, refuse to stay anywhere else. Instead of a fashion statement, the hotel is a memory vessel, from honeymoon embraces to babies' first steps, from a vacation with the grandkids to the last holiday on earth.

In 1957, before Anguilla had electricity, running water, or its three-dolphin flag, the hotel's founders, the late Jeremiah and Lydia Gumbs, hacked their way through mangroves and the remnants of a failed cotton (*Continued on page 224*)

Map by Joyce Pendola