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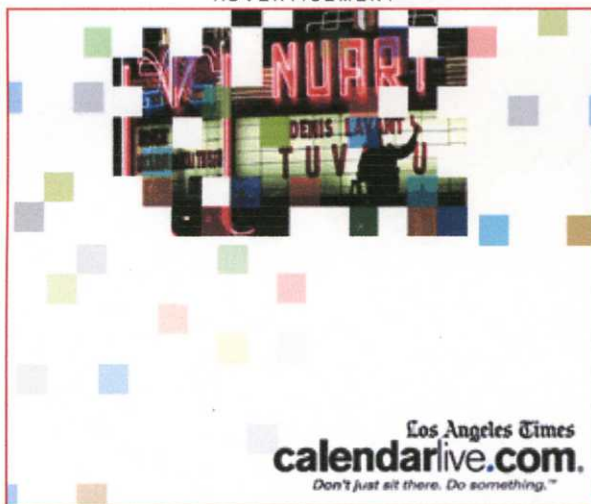
Have you heard? This unassuming Caribbean island is celebrity central. Why? Read on.

By Rosemary McClure, Times Staff Writer  
March 19, 2006

My assignment: Go behind the scenes of a celebrity vacation. Test the waters, so to speak, of Anguilla, a 35-square-mile island in the eastern Caribbean that ranks high on the list of über-chic superstar hideaways.

I didn't object. Who would complain about a winter trip to the British West Indies? Besides, Anguilla (rhymes with vanilla) has lately been generating a lot of buzz: Town & Country magazine called it the "new luxury capital of the Caribbean"; VH1 named it "celebrity winter vacation destination of the year"; and Travel & Leisure readers laud it annually for having one of the top resorts in the Caribbean.

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So I flew east five hours to Miami, southeast three hours to the island of St. Martin, then climbed aboard a rolling inter-island ferry for a 25-minute ride to this newly recognized Eden.

After all the hype — and the effort to get here — it was sort of a shock to see how, well, downright homely Anguilla is. Flat, dry and covered with thickets of scrub brush and brackish ponds. It's no Bali Hai. In fact, it's woefully lacking the rudimentary qualities needed for World's Favorite Island status: no cascading waterfalls, soaring volcanic mountains or luxuriant tropical foliage. There aren't even many palm trees. And if you're

looking for a nightclub or casino — or some boutique shopping — forget it.

But those things apparently matter little to Anguilla's A-list guests, who have found other qualities to commend it. And I have to agree that the island of 12,000 souls has undeniable virtues. Its beaches are narrow, but the sand is dazzling, stretching to the horizon, as white and fine as powdered sugar. The sea that washes them is a brilliant turquoise. And looming on shore are palatial villas, ultra-luxe retreats for multimillionaire guests in search of serenity and seclusion. Of course, such surroundings come at a price. In Anguilla, that can mean \$1,000 a night for a standard hotel room and \$75,000 a week at a pricey villa such as Exclusivity, a 15,000-square-foot bluff-top mansion that was a favorite of Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston.

"It's very, very private," Terry Peck, Exclusivity reservations manager, said of the villa. "There's a staff of 15, all of whom are trained to be invisible."



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Discretion is the maxim in Anguilla. "It's part of the appeal," said Amelia Vanterpool-Kubisch, director of tourism. The country's celebrity guests appreciate the anonymity, she said. "They tell their friends and more come. They spend a lot of money."

Unlike Anguilla's high-profile guests, I was traveling on a low-profile budget, sort of a grass-shack-on-a-backwater-beach budget. My options for staying at one of the island's outrageously priced resorts — the kind celebrities prefer — seemed limited. (Los Angeles Times writers travel anonymously and don't accept free or discounted travel.)

I groused about this to a friend of some means who didn't hesitate long before volunteering to come along. And bring credit cards. She needed some sun, she said, and if a star or two wandered onto a beach nearby, she would be even happier.

So we checked into Cap Juluca, where, we heard, Liam Neeson had just checked out.

The hotel, an "Arabian Nights" fantasy of whitewashed Moorish towers and domes, is frequently chosen as one of the best in the Caribbean by Travel & Leisure and Condé Nast Traveler magazines. We soon found out why. Instead of checking in at a registrations desk, we were led into a richly decorated library full of overstuffed couches and low tables. The receptionist asked an attendant to bring us icy glasses of rum punch and told us to relax while she did the paperwork. Very gracious. Very private.

Then we were taken through lush grounds to our villa, one of 18 spread along Maunday's Bay Beach, a golden milelong crescent of sand and water. Some of the villas have traditional hotel-style rooms with nontraditional bonuses: private towers that open to the sky — for sunbathing or whatever — or marble bathrooms with two-person tubs and glass walls that open onto private gardens — for sunbathing or whatever. My friend Wendi wished she had brought along her husband, Harold, instead of me. Too late now, I said.

The largest villas have five bedrooms, private pools and butler service and cost \$7,740 a night in high season, which stretches from January through March. All of the villas have access to the beach, where personal attendants set up umbrellas and serve sorbets and other delights to ward off the ennui that can accompany a tiring day in the sun.

While Wendi sat on the beach eating mango sorbet and watching in vain for stars, I explored the island. Anguilla — derived from the French word for "eel," a reference to the country's narrow shape — is only 16 miles long and 3.5 miles wide. Other than the 33 sun-swept beaches, there's not a lot to see.

Away from the coast, small concrete-block homes dot the scrubby terrain, and goats graze lazily on brush. The island is a low-key beachcomber's paradise, with two stoplights, friendly residents and a laid-back attitude.

Crime, although not nonexistent, is still so rare that many doors have no locks. When we checked into Cap Juluca, I called the front desk to report that the bellman had forgotten to leave a key. "There aren't any," I was told. I sputtered, my raised-in-L.A. fears flaring. "We haven't had keys for 15 years," the desk clerk said soothingly. "And we've had no problems."

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## Colonial history

I learned more about the island as I traveled its uncrowded highways. Unlike many colonial regions, Anguilla was so happy under foreign rule that it was willing to fight to stay that way. The English colonized it in 1650 but eventually found the soil too poor to support a plantation economy. Britain recommended an island union of St. Kitts, Anguilla and Nevis, but the Anguillans rebelled, causing English troops to intervene. Their island became a dependent territory in 1980.

Residents are gracious hosts who seem to enjoy welcoming guests. "It's not like some

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other places in the region," said Victor Banks, minister of finance. "Anguillans own the shops, the banks, the businesses, and 95% own their own homes. They have power. And they like to share their island with others."

Several tourists told me the British link also helped boost tourism. "We travel a lot," said Andrea Giordano, of Southampton, N.Y., "and lately we've been doing the British West Indies [Turks and Caicos, Caymans, British Virgin Islands, Montserrat and Anguilla]. With the British, there's a level of service that can't be matched by the French or anyone else."

Tourists apparently have noticed. Anguilla's mix of hospitable service, uncrowded beaches and high-end resorts has turned this unlikely Eden into a Caribbean success story. Construction of villas and hotel rooms is booming; the island's first golf course will be completed in November; and unemployment is so low the country must import labor.

Last year, the island's main runway was expanded to allow private jets to land; during the Christmas-New Year's holiday it was so jammed with planes that employees ran out of places to park them.

My island tour took me past some of the villas those elite guests occupy. I peeked inside, pretending I was a show-business mogul with \$6,000 or so to burn nightly.

Altamar, a trio of houses on a deserted beach, ranked high on my list of wanna-stay places. The stark white villas have soaring open spaces, fitness centers, home theaters that look like mini-cinemas and double kitchens — "for people who like to entertain," said a staff member who gave me a tour of one of the houses. He said Brad and Jen had stayed in the Brazilian Emerald house, a 13,000-square-foot gem that includes a hot tub for 12.

"They must have gotten around a lot when they were a couple," I said, referring to their visit to Exclusivity Villa on the other end of the island. He laughed at my unintended double-entendre.

From there, I zipped over to Covecastles, a group of 15 villas that have been mentioned twice in Architectural Digest. The luxurious beachfront homes are a geometric fantasy of high ceilings and beautiful views.

"So tell me," I said to an employee, "what celebrities have stayed here?"

"You didn't hear it from me," she answered. "But you might be right if you guessed P. Diddy and Meryl Streep."

"What a couple," I said.

"Not together," she said, looking at me disdainfully.

My drive eventually took me to the Valley, the island's capital and its only real town. It is unassuming, with a few businesses, a police department and a hospital. The three cars I saw lined up at the stoplight on Coronation Avenue probably would be considered a traffic jam. I kept going, heading for Shoal Bay, the island's best-known beach.

I had read quite a bit about Shoal Bay Beach, which, according to Islands magazine, is "home of the whitest sand on the planet." It's also one of the few places that may be crowded. About 60,000 day-trippers from St. Martin descend on its milelong strip of silvery sand annually to snorkel and swim.

Rain and strong winds kept the crowds away the day I visited; the weather also kept me from snorkeling, a major disappointment. But the hype was right: The sand is incredibly white and fine; the water clear and aquamarine, even with storm clouds overhead. And I found other things to do.

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**A bargain at \$355 a night**

A refurbished all-suite resort called Kú opened last fall at the edge of Shoal Beach. I had heard it had reasonable prices — that's unique here — so I strolled through its grounds and looked at a suite. The resort isn't elegant or grand, but it's cool, in a minimalist, South Beach sort of way, with large rooms painted white and pale aqua and decorated with white furnishings and duvets. There are full kitchens, and each suite is oceanfront or has an ocean view.

It was still pricey, but the tab — from \$355 to \$475 per night in high season — was nearly half that of many places I checked. "It's totally different" from Cap Juluca, said Sue Ricketts, marketing director for both Kú and Cap Juluca. "And it's supposed to be different. We're looking for a younger market, families with kids and teens, the children of the people who go to Cap Juluca."

I wandered back out to the beach, where it was still raining, and dived into Uncle Ernie's beach stand for shelter. While I munched on barbecued chicken and pigeon peas and rice, an island staple, Ernie Harrigan, 87, told me about life on Shoal Beach. And he took credit for Anguilla's success as a tourist destination.

"I've been here 22 years, and I started it all," said Harrigan, who may be the island's most famous restaurateur, although his cuisine — ribs, lobster, crayfish, burgers — costs less than \$10 per meal. Add \$2 and he'll serve you a Heineken.

Harrigan's prices are bucking a trend. Anguilla's wealthy visitors enjoy dining out and have no trouble finding restaurants that cater to their sophisticated palates; \$100 per-person dinners are common at such restaurants as Blanchard's, Pimms and Oliver's. But there's a bonus to dining out here; the local restaurants can be a good place to catch sight of superstars.

Hibernia, a 13-table open-air restaurant at the eastern end of the island, specializes in French-Asian cuisine. Its guestbook is a who-who's of island visitors: Robert De Niro, Kevin Kline, John Malkovich, Elvis Costello, Mariah Carey, Aidan Quinn, and Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins.

It's almost like visiting a restaurant in Beverly Hills.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

In the West Indies, the stars are out

#### GETTING THERE:

**From LAX** to Anguilla, connecting service (change of planes) is available on American; to St. Martin, connecting service is available on American, Continental, US Airways and United. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$671 until April 4, increasing to \$770.

**Link Ferries** connects Marigot, St. Martin, to Blowing Point, Anguilla. A boat makes round-trips every 30 minutes from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Tickets \$12, with a \$2 departure tax. Reservations are not necessary. Call (264) 497-2231, <http://www.link.ai>.

#### TELEPHONES:

**Numbers** in Anguilla can be dialed direct from the United States.

#### WHERE TO STAY:

**Hotels** add a 20% fee (10% service, 10% government tax) to bills; many require a minimum stay during high season or holiday periods. (CuisinArt, for instance, requires a 10-day stay during the Christmas holiday.) Hotel and villa prices are lowest during the steamy summer season, when they often decrease by about 50%.

**Cap Juluca**, P.O. Box 240, Anguilla; (888) 858-5822, <http://www.capjuluca.com> . Fine service, accommodations and dining on Maunday's Bay. Doubles start at \$750 a night in high season.

**Covecastles**, P.O. Box 248, Anguilla; (264) 497-6801, <http://www.covecastles.com> . Ultramodern beach houses and villas on a secluded shoreline at Shoal Bay West. Doubles start at \$895 a night in high season.

**CuisinArt**, P.O. Box 2000, Rendezvous Bay, Anguilla; (800) 943-3210, <http://www.cuisinartresort.com> . Take cooking classes while you relax at this high-end full-scale resort on beautiful Rendezvous Bay. Yes, it is owned by the same folks who brought you the kitchen appliance. Doubles start at \$625 a night in high season.

**Kú**, P.O. Box 51, Shoal Bay East, Anguilla; (800) 869-5827, <http://www.kuanguilla.com> . Refurbished all-suite beach resort opened in the fall. Doubles start at \$295 a night in high season.

**La Sirena Hotel**, P.O. Box 200, Meads Bay, Anguilla; (264) 497-6827, <http://www.la-sirena.com> . Travelers will find clean rooms at this informal budget-style motel. It's not on a beach, but you can walk to one. You'll probably need to rent a car to get around. Doubles start at \$260 a night in high season.

#### WHERE TO EAT:

**Mango's Seaside Grill**, Barnes Bay, Anguilla; (264) 497-6479, <http://www.mangos.ai> . Delightful open-air restaurant on the beach offers grilled and seared lobster, snapper and other seafood, pasta and chicken. Dinner entrees \$29-\$42.

**Tasty's**, South Hill, Anguilla; (264) 497-2737. Fun murals and excellent island cuisine are found at this small, casual Anguillian-owned restaurant. Chef and owner Dale Carty has been featured in *Bon Appétit* and *Travel & Leisure* magazines. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dinner entrees \$14-\$33.

**Blanchard's**, Meads Bay, Anguilla; (264) 497-6100, <http://www.blanchardsrestaurant.com> . Wonderful Caribbean flavors and décor at this pricey seaside restaurant. Many say it's the best on the island. Lovely setting in a garden. Dinner entrees \$34-\$58.

#### OTHER DETAILS:

**Anguilla** is English-speaking and is four hours ahead of Pacific Standard Time. Cars are driven on the left side, as in Britain. Those exiting the country pay a \$25 departure tax.

#### TO LEARN MORE:

**Anguilla Tourist Board**, Coronation Avenue, the Valley, Anguilla, BWI; (877) 426-4845 or (264) 497-2759, <http://www.anguilla-vacation.com> .

— Rosemary McClure

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