

There's no shortage of beaches in Antigua

MELODY WREN
SPECIAL THE CJN

Antigua is unquestionably one of the world's great beach destinations, having one for every day of the year – yes, there are 365 beaches.

The Caribbean side of the island has the most beaches, some more notable than others. Darkwood Beach is located on the south west coast of Antigua about five minutes drive south of Jolly Harbour. Crystal blue waters, great snorkelling and gentle cooling breezes make this beach a favourite of many.

Ffreyes Beach, located on Antigua's west coast, features powder white sand and a view of Montserrat on exceptionally clear days. Take time to have lunch or a drink at Dennis's Cocktail Bar and Restaurant, with an exceptionally striking view across two of Antigua's most eye-catching beaches. Owner Dennis Thomas learned how to cook from his mom, and the love shows in the meals he prepares.

No visit to the island is complete without seeing Nelson's Dockyard, the restored Georgian yard named after the famous English Admiral Horatio Nelson. This sight suits history buffs, yachters and the curious explorer type of traveller.

It's hardly off the beaten track, but situated in English Harbour, it is Antigua's most revered attraction for a reason. As the name suggests, it dates back to the 18th century and was once under the command of British naval legend Horatio Nelson. It's the only remaining working Georgian dockyard in the world.

The history is what brings people here, but the setting surrounded by hills and water is the reason they make a day of it. You don't really need the official tour, as signposts cover much of the same ground anyway, while the museum is definitely



Ffreyes Beach — one of Antigua's 365 magnificent beaches. MELDOY WREN PHOTO

worth a visit.

The village still maintains a British feel, complete with red phone boxes from the United Kingdom, restaurants, cafés, boats to charter and bakeries make it a delightful area to stroll and explore.

Dow's Hill Interpretation Centre offers a well-crafted and knowledgeable production on the history, culture and heritage of Antigua and Barbuda. Look back into the six eras that have shaped and formed what the island is today, taking you on a trip through the eras of the American hunters, the enormous British military presence and the struggle against slavery.

Following the 15-minute film, stand at the top of the hill and you'll be able to see key locations in the harbours and forts below that were affected by the history of ships, pirates, slavery and sugar plantations. From English Harbour, the patchwork quilt of British history and the substantial British influence makes sense of the British feel to the island. There are 40

forts on the island, each spaced two miles apart.

Antigua is a big yachting destination, but if you haven't brought your own boat along, it's possible to learn the ropes with Ondeck or Sunsail. Staying at Nonsuch Bay resort allowed us to enjoy a sailing excursion with fully qualified Captain Micky, who allowed us to be involved as little or as much as we wanted. After a wonderful tour of Nonsuch Bay (about 1-1/2 hours) with lots of tacking and jibing, he took down the main sail and the spinnaker sail took us back into the harbour.

The capital city of St. John's is a true melting pot of new complexes and renovated 19th-century Caribbean buildings. The city was founded in the 1660s by the English colonizers and was made prosperous up to the mid-19th century by the success of sugar production on the island. Following emancipation and the massive reduction in sugar prices, the town began to deteriorate.

For serious shoppers, Heritage Quay has high-end outlet stores in a pedestrian mall layout that's a big attraction for cruise ships. One street over, Ratcliffe Quay has more interesting, locally owned boutiques to browse in. Show your airline ticket or boarding pass and get a discount in the shops. You often can barter for a better deal if you use Caribbean currency, especially in the smaller shops and market stalls.

Where to stay:

St. James Resort: This large resort is tucked away on a secluded 100-acre peninsula on the southeastern coast of Antigua. With the Atlantic on one side and a restaurant overlooking Marmora Bay, this all-inclusive getaway gives you a choice of pools, restaurants, bars and beaches to relax in. It's so all encompassing that you could spend an entire holiday there without leaving, but with so much to do and see in Antigua, why would you? Two white-sand beaches offer swimming, as well as complimentary non-motorized water sports such as kayaking, pedal boating and catamaran sailing. www.stjamesclubantigua.com

Nonsuch Bay Resort: We stayed in a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment overlooking the pool and the ocean, and we could have stayed months with the space, the perfectly appointed amenities, and the sheer simple luxurious feeling of it. Rentals are available in one- to three-bedroom apartments, and for a small extra fee, the resort will stock your fridge with provisions so that you don't have to waste valuable relaxing time grocery shopping.

The beach and Nonsuch Bay harbour has sail boats, wind surfing, hobie-cats, paddle boards, snorkel equipment. www.nonsuchbayresort.com ■

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