

The Two River Times

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Anguilla, Small But Mighty

By Linda McK.Stewart

This is a tale that probably should not be told. It's a tale about Anguilla, a diminutive Caribbean island, 17 miles tip to tip, three miles across, population 12,000. And why not tell Anguilla's tale? Well, the best, (albeit inelegant) answer is found in that old backcountry saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Situated in the Leeward Islands, just five miles north of St. Martins, Anguilla, metaphorically speaking, "ain't broke." Indeed, it's a wave-lapped realm of Caribbean tranquility, fortified against the woes of

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The Anacaona Boutique Hotel on the beach in Anguilla. Courtesy Robin Miller



the world by a rim of 33 quite perfect, white powder beaches, many of them delightfully deserted.

It was right after World War II that a tsunami of tourism surged southward, from the Bahamas to the Grenadines. Casinos, high-rises and duty-free shopping sprang up on every palmy shore. Overnight, thatched sheds along dirt runways turned into international terminals with mile-long asphalt strips where tourist-laden, wide-bodied everything roared in from all points of the compass. But tiny Anguilla was blessedly spared. As recently as 1976 Anguilla was happily pattering along without electricity, paved roads or telephone service. Island life unfolded by lantern light, water wells, boat and bicycle. By day yachts from other islands anchored offshore so pampered passengers could scuba and snorkel Anguilla's fish-teeming reefs and lounge on those pristine beaches. But come sunset they sailed on. Cruise ships called elsewhere and so did big-time hoteliers. Life on Anguilla remained tranquil.

Then in 1984 a British couple, Sue and Robin Ricketts, in love with the island, in love with its people, opened the Malliouhana, a luxury beachfront hotel. It was Anguilla's first such hotel... five stars with all the trimmings. Today, no longer unique, the Malliouhana has been joined by other world-class hotels: Cap Juluca, a Moorish architectural jewel on the beach of mile-long Maundays Bay; CuisineArt with its incredible Venus Spa on the edge of Rendezvous Bay and most recently the grander than grand Viceroy, a Starwood property, overlooking both Barnes and Mead's Bay. Guests checking into any one of them can be forgiven if, rum punch in hand, beach umbrella tilted just so, they surrender completely, never exploring beyond the hotel's bougainvillea hedges. It's understandable...but still, a bit of a shame, because Anguilla is the repository of four centuries of tumultuous, often poignant history.

When Columbus sailed by non-stop in 1493 the island was inhabited by Arawaks. But by 1650 when British colonizers arrived, the Arawaks had all departed. For 200 years Anguilla was tossed like a wood chip in the maelstrom of Caribbean wars fought among Holland, France, England, Spain and even Sweden. Eventually the English settlers threw up their hands, despairing that Anguilla's meager topsoil would ever support the cushy plantation life enjoyed on other more fertile islands. One by one they departed, turning their property over to African slaves and native islanders. Although officially British territory, Anguilla became accustomed to fending for itself, accepting the fact that HRH, way over there in England, took scant interest in island affairs. The result of such hands-off treatment: a resilient, cheerfully self-reliant people, who, as one Anguillan told me, "We likes to do for ourselves." Crime is a rarity. Race and color are non-issues. Four or five island families proudly trace an unbroken ancestral line all the way back to the first British colonizers.

Not many vacationers, luxuriating in the island's handsome five-star hotels get so much as an inkling of Anguilla's past, its cultural heritage, and its stormy history. Which is why the newly opened Anacaona Boutique Hotel, a small beachfront gem of 27 rooms and suites on mile-long Meads Bay, is such a welcome addition. With not one but two swimming pools, a secluded, quiet beach (with lunch and bar service!) well-tended gardens and an unmistakable air of quiet elegance, the Anacaona is ideal for discerning guests, delighted to discover that there is such a thing as "affordable chic." Anacaona's owners, the same Robin and

Sue Ricketts who, way back when presided over the Malliouhana, believe that even the most luxurious of Anguillan vacations is enhanced when it includes a glimpse into Anguilla's colorful past. Accordingly they've made a practice of inviting all manner of island talent to their hotel to the delight of their guests. Historians, storytellers, geologists, ornithologists, sailing experts make evenings at the Anacaona both memorable and delightful. Thursday evenings are reserved for the Mayoumba Folkloric troupe. Island-authentic, colorful in their traditional dress, their songs and dances have rescued island songs and tales from oblivion. "Come back, come back!" they sing with laughing, beckoning hands. The cordiality is genuine but so is the impression of a kindly but tightly knit society, holding firm to virtues that have all but slipped from view in the "outside world."

That's an impression reinforced by even the most casual island tour. In the Valley, Anguilla's capital, "Good morning" or "Good afternoon" is a given, even among strangers. No need to pocket the keys of your car, no need to chain your bike. A wallet mistakenly left on the counter of the ZaZaa Boutique is sure to be returned, as often as not by a breathless child with strict instructions to "Give it straightaway to the lady in the green straw hat."

Anguilla may not be Utopia. But it may well be as close as any of us will ever get to that fabled place. Indeed it's true: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Right on, Anguilla!

IF YOU GO: Anguilla is accessible by air from St. Martin, San Juan Puerto Rico and Miami. For more details: info@anacaonahotel.com.