

"We sell people a fantasy when they come here", said Antoine Brown, manager of St James Club in Antigua.

For me the fantasy wasn't anywhere near as good as the reality.

It wasn't just the hundreds of white sandy beaches, 365 to be precise, the crystal blue seas or year-round sunshine that I loved about Antigua.

There's a carefree, friendly atmosphere on the island that made me want to move into one of the multi-coloured houses that line the streets, each uniquely designed and painted by its owner, and never go back to grey old England.

I was lucky enough to stay in a royal suite at St James Club, with my own balcony which boasted postcard-perfect views across the south-eastern coast.

The hotel had everything a holidaymaker could wish for, two beaches, six pools, flawless service, fantastic food and lots of water activities.

But it would be a crime to visit Antigua and not explore off the resorts.

The view from the top of Shirley Heights Lookout is reason alone to visit the island with panoramic views across English Harbour and stunning sunsets.

There are also so many things to do, from sailing and snorkelling to high wire through the jungle and local cuisine.

With Antigua Sailing Week underway, I took to the water to watch a day of racing on a Wadadli Cats catamaran cruise.

I was treated to a prime view of the sailing, fantastic local food for lunch and a swim in the warm Caribbean ocean off a deserted beach as well as a stunning tour of the Antiguan coastline.

Sticking with the boating theme I turned

# Paradise isle

If you're looking for a romantic get-away, you can't go far wrong with a Caribbean island. Rachael Burnett explores the white, sandy beaches of Antigua

my hand to the tiller the following day with a sailing lesson from the Ondeck team on one of their luxurious yachts.

As a fairly inexperienced sailor – I've only dabbled in dinghy sailing a couple of times before – I found yachting was really enjoyable and easy to pick up under the skilled tuition of my teachers.

And Antigua Sailing Week doesn't just happen on the water, the buzz and party vibe permeates the whole island with hundreds of sailors coming from around the world to join in the annual event.

I had a great time dancing the night away at one of the parties on the waterfront at Falmouth Harbour where I got to try the famous Caribbean rum punch.

When I reluctantly left St James Club to spend my remaining nights at the Verandah Resort and Spa I found an equally charming resort with stunning views along the north-east coast.

This smaller hotel, part of the same Elite Island Resort group, had a more laid-back feel with the same level of luxurious facilities and service.

One of the high-points of my stay was flying through the treetops on the Antigua Rainforest Canopy Tour. Not for the faint-hearted this thrilling activity is an unforgettable way to explore the forest along dozens of zip lines and suspension bridges.

Another highlight was exploring the local cuisine, from the delicious sample menu at St James Club where I got my first taste of swordfish, to melt-in-your-mouth lobster at the Verandah and trying conch and goat, both delicious, at Turners Beach Restaurant and Bar.

On my last day I took a walk around the capital St Johns and discovered a vibrant town where I sampled food and drink at the public markets and huge range of duty free shops at Heritage Quay. While not as many visitors explore the bustling town, I would definitely recommend it for the wonderful insight it gives into local customs and way of life on the island. I really did have the time of my life in Antigua and hated leaving such a beautiful place at the end of my stay. ●



