



EXPLORE
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GOING COCO

down in Antigua



NUTS: Jon slurps his coconut and, right, visiting statue of his namesake Sir Vere Bird in St John's – first prime minister of Antigua in 1960



Sailing and snorkelling are a rum do in the Caribbean

by **Jon Bird**

WITH three swift machete blows the gruff Antiguan hacked open the fresh coconut and passed it to me from his pick-up truck.

As I slurped its sweet water through a straw he gave me a cheeky grin and declared: "That'll get your piston working."

Two US dollars for a drink, delicious jelly-like flesh and some pep in the pants department – bargain.

And there were more health tips from an ageing, dreadlocked man carrying leaves from an aloe vera plant and calling himself Dr Sam, strolling near the duty-free shops of Antigua's capital, St John's.

The "doctor" rubbed the leaf pulp on my sunburn and, as promised, it soothed the soreness. Then came the real sting – a 10-dollar bill.

Sam's benevolence was financially motivated but care for tourists was typical of the relaxed Antiguan I met during a five-day stay on the sun-drenched West Indian isle.

After a comfortable eight-hour Virgin Atlantic flight from Gatwick it was a short drive on narrow and bumpy roads, past brightly painted homes, to the secluded St James's Club.

The 250-room all-inclusive resort has seven bars and restaurants, six swimming pools, six tennis courts, a spa, fitness centre and a kids' club.

It sits on a peninsula between

beaches on the Atlantic and the calmer Caribbean, which offer guests complimentary kayaking, pedal boating, windsurfing, snorkelling and catamaran sailing.

My suite was palatial, with air con, widescreen TV, massive bed, a bathroom big enough for a football team and balcony on to Mamora Bay where the sea slapped the sand and brown pelicans flapped overhead.

There was also a strange shack-shack tree, whose 12in black seed pods are decorated and sold as percussion instruments, including at the spectacular Shirley Heights.

Here, 10 dollars gets you a rum punch, a steelband playing covers of A-ha, Abba and Glenn Miller and glorious views of the sun sinking over English Harbour and Georgian shipyard Nelson's Dockyard.

The British were the island's first European settlers and Nelson the senior officer at the dockyard

from 1784-1787. The island was headquarters for the British fleet and a big producer of sugar cane.

For a more energetic experience, take a day trip on one of Wadadli Cats' 66ft boats, from English Harbour, with yet more rum punch, music and food.

Perching on webbing between the two yellow hulls with my feet hanging over the front was as exhilarating as a roller-coaster ride.

A small pod of dolphins started playing near the boat as we passed rock legend Eric Clapton's discreet cliff-top home and over lunch I snorkelled in Morris Bay and watched a black and white spotted eagle ray, with its long, string-like tail, swoop past me with the grace of a spiralling bird of prey.

The following day we ditched the motorised boating for an afternoon sail on a Bavaria 42 with Ondeck, which is accredited to give sailing and powerboat training. Helming a yacht as the sails fill and it heels over is a liberating experience.

There was also time for a snorkel beneath the Pillars of Hercules, limestone formations in the cliffs.

After two nights at St James's we moved to The Verandah Resort and Spa, an eco-friendly spot with 200 suites that blend into the backdrop. The all-inclusive resort's rooms are in little streets lined by banana plants and palms.

I saw mongoose on arrival and was serenaded by tree frogs at night. Verandah has tennis courts, pools,

mini-golf, restaurants, two beaches, a spa, fitness centre, Wi-Fi in reception and wedding gazebos, plus golf buggies to carry guests.

My bed was so comfortable I slept through an earthquake measuring 5.2 on the Richter scale. The deceptively strong rum punches I'd drunk with my steak at the resort's Nicole's restaurant may have helped.

I woke to drumming on the roof as well as in my head. But the hammering rain brought more comfortable temperatures after the stifling heat of the previous days – just right for the amazing treetop Antigua Rainforest Canopy Tour.

A dozen overhead zipwires, up to 360ft long and 300ft above the ground, criss-cross a gorge carrying carefully clipped-on thrill-seekers from jungle platform to platform, like latter-day Indiana Joneses.

It is real heart in the mouth stuff until you learn to relax and trust your instructors. But taking the leap to visit Antigua is a far easier decision and one you'll not regret.

FACTFILE A half-day yacht charter with Ondeck Sailing (www.ondeck.sailing.com/antigua) from £274. The full zipline tour from £70.50, (www.antiguainforest.com). Seven nights all-inclusive at St James's Club & Villas, two adults sharing a standard club room, leaving on May 6 and inc return Virgin Atlantic flights from Gatwick, from £1,433. A similar deal at The Verandah Resort & Spa, leaves June 10, from £1,325 (www.virgin.holidays.co.uk, 0844 557 3859).

TRAVEL TIPS

- **WATCH** out for the rum punch, it's stronger than you think.
- **USE** plenty of sunblock or cover up, even Factor 30 was not enough protection.
- **SAVE** space for shopping. There are great duty-free bargains in St John's – check out www.visitantiguabarbuda.com for loads of ideas.

£1,000

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My PERFECT day

By **DEAN JONES**, sports writer for the Sunday People.

MORNING

I'd wake up to the stunning ocean view at the Portofino Hotel and Marina in Redondo Beach in California. Then a quick trip along the coast to Huntington Beach for a bite to eat at the family-run cafe Sugar Shack.

NOON

Relax on Copacabana Beach, Rio De Janeiro, with sweet, strong caipirinha while catching some rays.

NIGHT

A meal at the stunning Oblix restaurant in London's Shard before zipping out to Vienna, Austria, for a boozy night in the bars around the city's manic Bermuda Triangle area.



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