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FLAMBOYANT SPIRITS

Carnival Time and more in Antigua

Steve Gillick

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19 SEP 2016: Rosie McMaster has actually slept with hot sauce! As we sat around a kitchen table piled end to end with small bottles of Susie's Hot Sauce, Rosie laughed and related that over the 26 years she's operated the company, there have been more than a few occasions when she's fallen asleep, totally exhausted, only to wake up with

bottles of hot sauce all around her in bed. “See I even sleep with hot sauce!”



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Susie’s Hot Sauce, named after her late mom, is an international sensation (literally) and we were in the process of discovering that this was a one-person labour of love. When I asked Rosie what differentiated her hot sauce from the hundred others on the market, the smile disappeared, she looked me in the eye and with a serious tone in her voice said, “I’m an Aries and I cook hot sauce. Aries are strong headed...customer support drives me and fuels me...but the differentiating factors can be described in three words: Heart, Soul and Love”.

I quickly discovered that Rosie’s passion for excellence was shared by many on Antigua, a 108 square mile paradise in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean.

Ironic as it seems, the bright red flowers of a tree called the “Flamboyant”, seem to represent the spirit of the island. The word “flamboyant’ usually

refers to 'lively energy and excitement' and my visit at the end of July was the embodiment of flamboyance, not only because of the incredibly colourful flowers in bloom (Hibiscus, Bougainvillea, Frangipani and Ixora), not only because of the flowering, scented fruit trees (mango, guava, banana, lemon, lime and paw paw), but because it was Carnival time and well, Antiguan know how to let loose and party!

I set out from the new V.C. Bird International Airport in St. John's, heading to Carlisle Bay, about 40 minutes away, with my very personable driver/guide Cleo Henry, courtesy of the Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Office.

Cleo provided me with an overview of Antigua's history, geography, family life and even food. We passed by small village restaurants with chalk board menus that included local fare such as Goat Water (a flavourful goat meat broth), Pepper Pot (a stew of pickled pig tail, snout, salted beef and poultry with vegetables and beans) and Bull Foot Soup (a stew of a cow's foot, sweet potato, yams, carrots and barley). The one treat I did try was the local beer, appropriately named "Wadadli", which is the native Arawak name for Antigua.

Carlisle Bay is an impressive five star resort with large rooms opening up to soft sand and beautiful ocean views, with an atmosphere that was described to me as "Shabby Chic" or informal but upscale.

That evening we attended the opening event of Carnival, the Party Monarch Competition, along with upwards of 16,000 very enthusiastic people. Ten singers competed in each of the Groovy and Jumpy competitions, with points awarded for

originality, creativity, adherence to the Carnival theme and audience interaction. The evening was filled with hypnotic and incredibly lively Soca rhythms, amazing choreography, talented dancers, creative props and fireworks. When we left at 2:15 am, there was still at least an hour left in the program.

And over the next few days, we participated in other Carnival events that included a 4:30 am wake up to attend J'Ouvert (short for "Jour Ouvert" or Opening day of Carnival), with parades of costumed, dancing, ebullient Antiguan snaking their way through the streets of St. John's, celebrating their culture and the fact that this was August 1st—Emancipation Day.

At a street corner restaurant, we enjoyed a traditional J'Ouvert breakfast of Chapup (cooked, seasoned okra, spinach and eggplant), deliciously salty and spicy Red Herring, even more salty Salt Fish, a slide of avocado and a sweet Johnny Cake, all washed down with Wadadli beer.

Later in the afternoon, at Carnival Monday Mas (short for 'masquerade'), we donned our "Insane Army" T-shirts and joined thousands as we walked through the city, following floats with deafening speakers that blared out popular soca hits with sing-a-long lyrics, such as Ricardo Drue's ultra-popular song 'Professional': "Whole day we drinkin and we doh need no Chaser, Rum in ah we system I'm ah professional drinker".

The next day at the Parade of the Bands, we sat at on one of the judging venues as colourful costumes, dancers, floats, steel drum bands and absolute merriment passed by, with each contingent competing in the categories of

craftsmanship, visual impact, interpretation of the theme and quality of masks and costumes.

Carnival was an absolute hoot and for those looking to connect with the land and the people—one of the main reasons for travel in every age category these days—this was a perfect venue for getting close to the action, smiling, dancing, laughing, taking tons of photos and unwinding.

And when Carnival is not happening on Antigua there are some pretty amazing venues and attractions that differentiate it from its Caribbean neighbours. Antigua has 365 beaches (one for every day of the year, as their promotions advise) and you can literally plant yourself at any one of them (they all have public access), enjoying the meals at the local beach bar, shopping for beach wear and souvenirs at the colourful stands and then repeating the routine at the beach next door.

For those into history, English Harbour and Falmouth includes Nelson's Dockyard, dating to the mid-18th century with historic buildings, a museum, the Copper and Lumber Store Hotel, restaurants and a marina. Betty's Hope is a sugarcane plantation with two restored windmills. The open-air museum, which is pleasantly overrun by goats, educates visitors and locals about sugar cane production, the slave trade, and Emancipation in 1834.

For vistas and views, nothing beats the Shirley Heights Sunset Party and BBQ, held every Sunday with dinosaur-size plates of ribs and chicken, steel band music and setting-sun views of English Harbour. On the east side of the island spectacular waves can be seen at Devil's Bridge, a natural rock arch under which the turbulent

Atlantic Ocean waters push through blow holes, resulting in powerful sprays.

And not far away is Blue Waters Resort and Spa, where I stayed for my last two nights. This is another amazing five star property with friendly staff, really good food, Flamboyants (trees), Bananaquits (birds) and dreamy views of the ocean.

Special interest travellers can pamper their senses in Antigua and Barbuda with exploration, history, culture, small towns, old churches, get-away beaches, flowers, fruits, food and great people. The passion that Rosie McMaster exemplified can be found just about everywhere on the island where fun and tradition mix with Caribbean sun and sand, with some pretty awesome results.

Antigua



Ricardo Drue, the winner of the Groovy Competition, during the Party Monarch Competition



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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