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You've got options at these five secluded hideaways

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Secluded hideouts worth seeking out

BY DAVID SWANSON
Special to The Miami Herald

Searching for a true Caribbean hideaway? If you define your tropical escape as something beyond swim-up bars and limbo contests, read on.

After dozens of trips that have taken me to every inhabited island in the Caribbean, and after well over a thousand hotel inspections, I've found what I prefer. Hint: It's not 300-room cookie-cutter chain resorts.

Here are five one-of-a-kind hideouts that provide true escape. These outposts require a little extra effort to reach, and once you've arrived, you'll want a book — or two — to fill the time one might normally spend on vacation trolling through duty-free shops or museums. Except for the last pick, you also won't find casinos, nightlife or golf.

But you will discover a jet-free, cruise-ship-free landing offering a naturalness that the busier destinations covet. These Caribbean hideaways are all about rest and renewal. Each allows the beauty of its setting to shape the guest experience.

*HIDEAWAYS, FROM 1J

PRIVACY OPTION: GUANA ISLAND, BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

An 850-acre islet less than a mile off Tortola, Guana Island is also the name of a 15-room inn built in the 1930s. When the Jarecki family of New York purchased the island as a second home in 1975, the property had charm, but needed attention — everything was falling apart. Today, Guana is a smooth-running upscale establishment.

Sprinkled over the saddle of a breezy ridge, several hundred feet above sea level, rooms are positioned at varying distances from the main lodge.

Each is different, boasting varying views, layouts and seclusion, but what they share is a vaguely Greek Cycladian personality: white-washed stone walls with shutters trimmed in bright blue. Each room has a terrace furnished with wicker and framed with oleander and frangipani.

The food at Guana is straightforward, unfussy, and satisfying. Dinner is served at shared or individual tables — seats are assigned each afternoon. A well-stocked honor bar is a gathering place for sunsets.

If evenings are convivial, it's easy to find privacy during the day.

White Bay is a luminous, one-third-mile-long beach that ranks with the Caribbean's most lovely and tranquil. It's a steep five-minute walk, or two-minute shuttle ride from the rooms down to the sand.

Six more coves ring Guana's shores, most reached only by ambitious trail or boat, arranged on request, and with a picnic lunch if you like.

There are miles of trails to explore, along with tennis courts, snorkeling, kayaks, sailboats and windsurfing, plus a tiny massage hut on the beach.

You may be content simply absorbing the natural environment. A flock of shy flamingos resides in the island's salt pond. The rock iguana, which numbered only about 100 in the world two decades ago on nearby Anegada, was re-introduced here in 1984 with spectacular results — Guana Island is now home to hundreds of the reclusive species. Guana's very appeal lies in this unvarnished integration into the environment.

CARIBBEAN HIDEAWAYS

- **Guana Island**, BVI, double rates are \$650 in summer, \$985 in winter, plus 17 percent tax/service, and include three meals daily, wine with meals, afternoon tea, and non-motorized watersports. Information: 800-544-8262; www.guana.com.

- **Montpelier Plantation Inn**, Nevis, starts at \$280 summer, \$480 winter, plus 20 percent tax/service, and includes a huge breakfast and afternoon tea daily. Information: 869-469-3462; www.montpeliernevis.com.

- **Kanantik**, Belize, doubles are \$285 year-round, plus 14 percent tax/service. The meal plan — breakfast, lunch, dinner daily — is \$64 per person, per day. Information: 877-759-8834