

ISLAND REPORT

# IS THERE ANYTHING NEW UNDER THE CARIBBEAN SUN?

Guana is secluded, undisturbed, and undiscovered. **BY ANDY ISAACSON**

**A** Quaker sugar plantation in the 18th century, Guana, nine miles north of Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, became a vacation destination in the 1930s after a Massachusetts couple, Beth and Louis Bigelow, purchased the overgrown isle and constructed a handful of cottages. They named it the Guana Island Club, attracting their Bostonian friends to the simple life. “There was no electricity and no hot water,” one guest from the era says, “but we all dressed for dinner.” Guana’s current owners, Dr. Henry Jarecki, a

The path to North Bay beach, on the Atlantic side of Guana Island. The windward bay has deep reefs and shipwrecks.



Clockwise from top left: the pool terrace of Harbour House Villa; tours of Guana's three-acre orchard culminate with a tasting; Guana's owners reintroduced several species, including the rock iguana; all cottages have sea views.



New York psychiatrist and investor, and his wife, Gloria, bought the island in 1975. (Their son Andrew is a filmmaker who earned an Oscar nomination for *Capturing the Friedmans* and whose latest, *The Jinx*, the stunning HBO documentary about Robert Durst, resulted in Durst's arrest.)

Guana may be the last B.V.I. still "virgin" in any meaningful sense. Around 90 percent of the 850-acre island (about the size of New York's Central Park) is undeveloped and hilly, shrouded in dense tropical vegetation. There is one dock and there are no cars. Aside from the clubhouse, with dining and common areas, and 20-odd cottages and villas with white exteriors and blue trim that call to mind Mykonos—tucked discreetly along the ridge-line on the island's western edge, overlooking the Caribbean on one side and the Atlantic on the other—hardly any buildings are visible at all. My villa came with its own Jacuzzi-sized infinity pool, from which I could gaze across thickets of white-flowering frangipani, tabebuia trees, and organ-pipe cacti, down

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toward the azure sea and beyond to Tortola, the most populated of the B.V.I.s into which most guests fly. Guana, meanwhile, never has more than 35 guests at a time.

The Jareckis were meticulous, inviting biologists to study its ecology—Guana is believed to harbor more varieties of flora and

fauna than any island of its size in the Caribbean—and repatriated such species as the rock iguana, red-legged tortoise, and a small flock of roseate flamingos that look like lawn ornaments in a salt pond behind the main beach, White Bay. Over the years, the family built a few more villas, cut miles of rugged hiking trails, and only reluctantly installed WiFi, but mainly left the island untamed—"a wildlife sanctuary with a cocktail hour," Dr. Jarecki likes to say.

There is electricity and hot water now, but the Jareckis have maintained the unglitzy, no-frills vibe of Guana's bygone days. ("Understated luxury," Antonia Hornung, the island's manager put it.) Rooms are deliberately without TVs or telephones—or even keys. Several also lack air-conditioning, cooled instead by pleasant trade winds and ceiling fans. The rattan and floral-patterned furniture in some cottages appears to date from the Jimmy Carter era, which is apparently how some



The pristine White Bay beach, on the Caribbean side of Guana Island; Tortola in the distance.

longtime “Guanaphiles”—several guests have been returning to Guana for more than a quarter century—would prefer to see things remain. Both bars, at the clubhouse and beach, use the honor system. Sand patches linger for days across the unmanicured beachside tennis court. The island operates as a resort, but in a way I felt more like the invited guest of some enigmatic millionaire host: well cared for but not pampered. “If people want someone chasing after them with chaise longues and ashtrays and cocktails on the beach, that’s not us,” explained general manager Andrei Mocanu, as we descended the steep hill from the cottages to the beach in his golf cart. “Here, you mix your own cocktails—we’re like home.”

It’s these homely touches and enduring traditions—the fresh-baked cookies left in the clubhouse as a mid-afternoon snack, the soup that always starts the four-course dinner, the first-name basis with staff—that define Guana’s ease and charm. The time-honored cocktail hour begins at 7:30 on the clubhouse terrace. I put on the requested “smart casual” dress and joined the other guests for sunset and Mojitos. Rachel Weisz and Daniel Craig, Walter Cronkite, Mario Batali, Nobel Prize-winning molecular-biologist James Watson: Guana receives its share of notables, whose

photos are presumably amidst the stack of yellowing albums in the lounge that chronicle every visitor on the dock before they depart the island. Not that it much matters. The scene on Guana is social and egalitarian; it’s even customary to break bread with others for a meal or two. Over canapés, I chatted with a British lawyer and his wife, who live on Tortola, and honeymooning chefs from New York.

The chefs, who’d trained under Boulud and Bouley, praised Guana’s food, confirming my own less-qualified opinion. Two years ago, Xavier Arnau, an eager young Spaniard with Michelin-star pedigree, took over the island’s kitchen. He now serves a Mediterranean- and Asian-inspired menu that gestures to the Caribbean: mahi mahi with pineapple salsa, soy-glazed monkfish, jerk chicken. But Arnau has grander, farm-to-table ambitions for Guana, using the bounty plucked from its own three-acre organic orchard.

Until four years ago, the orchard was tended by a Chinese ornithologist, Liao Wei Ping, who’d entertain guests with fruit tastings and readings from his own nature-inspired poetry. Liao arrived on Guana in 1984 and was so enchanted with the place that he stuck around, creating and cultivating the orchard for a quarter century. It had nearly gone fallow by the time its new steward, Vernon Daniel, an enthusiastic young agrotourism

graduate from Dominica, came to Guana last winter. Leading me through the orchard, Vernon described his efforts to date: from two dozen varieties of thriving fruit trees, including banana, soursop, and Spanish lime; a new greenhouse, boasting mints and basil, leafy greens, vegetables, and edible flowers. Under a shade tree, he continued Ping’s legacy, slicing fresh-picked papaya and star fruit for me to try. “No poetry,” he said, smiling.

I awoke each morning to the coos of bridled quail-doves outside my window and white cedar leaves gently rustling against the wooden plantation shutters. Then, after egg-white omelets and fruit, enjoyed on the breezy clubhouse terrace, I faced some difficult decisions: embark on an ambitious hike to one of Guana’s seven deserted beaches, taking a snorkel and a mask, or settle into a cushioned chaise longue on White Bay Beach to nurse a rum cocktail? More often than not, I chose the latter. Who could blame me? The beach is a perfect half-mile parabola of white sand, hemmed by sea grapes and palms and clear teal water.

My last evening, after an alfresco candlelit dinner, I strolled down a path through tropical foliage, led by soft flickers from tiki torches, to the Garden of Eden, a wooden pavilion on the cliff edge overlooking the Atlantic that hosts yoga classes, as well as open-air movie nights. (Andrew isn’t the only Jarecki involved in the entertainment business; two of his three brothers are filmmakers, his mother, Gloria, was a film critic for *Time* magazine and Henry has half a dozen movie and Broadway producer credits, including 2012’s “A Streetcar Named Desire” and the Debbie Allen-directed “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” featuring an all African-American cast.) The staff had cued up a private screening of *Casablanca* for me under the stars.

The next day, before leaving Guana, I had my photo snapped on the dock holding a red hibiscus flower, like all the guests before me. The staff instructed me to toss the flower overboard as the boat pulled away—another Guana tradition. If the petals drift back to shore, they explained, a return visit is fated. Turns out, the odds were in my favor: 60 percent of Guana’s guests come back. ♦

*Most guests traveling to Guana Island fly into San Juan, Puerto Rico, and then take a charter flight to Tortola. From there, it’s a 30-minute boat ride to Guana. Cottages from \$695; 212-482-6247; guana.com.*