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IN PRAISE *of* WINTER

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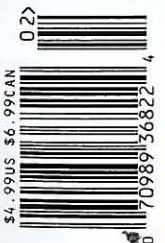
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It's a Wo

Fun-loving, big-hearted

Riding high: Newbies practice basic surfing positions—and attempt some hotdogging—at Zed's Surfing Adventures, a surf school on Barbados's south coast.



nderful Life

Barbados will have you wishing you lived here, too.

by **Charles Kulander**
photographs by **Susan Seubert**



I'm

walking along a sun-dappled Barbados beach, gazing at a knot of fishing boats bobbing like ducks on the turquoise sea. A family picnicking nearby waves me over and invites me to a meal of flying fish washed down with Barbadian rum. As we talk, I tell them how lucky they are to live on this lovely island. My host, David Smith, interrupts me to say Barbados is not an



island at all. Being the guest, I play along. “Okay then, what is it?”

“We’re a continent,” he says, throwing his arms to the sky, “because our hearts are so big!” Then he laughs.

A real Barbadian laugh is a seismic event. It begins deep in the belly, gains resonance as it rolls upward, then bursts out as a full-throated roar, often followed by rumbling aftershocks. I’ve heard this exuberant laugh twice already: upon leaping into my rental car and finding no steering wheel where I expected one (Barbadians drive on the left), and again after ignoring my waiter’s advice about the island’s hot pepper sauce.

Now I’m hearing it once more, and it hits me: This laughter—spontaneous, and, I’ll learn, ubiquitous—is the carefree expression of an island in deep love with itself. I’d been told by more than one Caribbean friend that Barbados—finger quotes here: “Little England”—is the most civil, polite island around. In other words, it’s on the, well, boring side. This clearly isn’t squaring with my experience so far. Quite the contrary: I am nursing a growing hunch that a lot of Barbados circumvents the formal-sounding “Little England” thing in favor of a homegrown *esprit d’île*. Since hunches are made to be confirmed, I have some research to do.

Though smaller than Puerto Rico or Jamaica, Barbados is rich in destinations. I’ll set a baseline with visits to Bridgetown, the island’s

Clockwise from above: Flashing a ready “Bajan” (Barbadian) smile, a woman fresh from her swim in the island’s tropical waters shares a warm moment with a friend. Curving Flemish gables distinguish the Great House at St. Nicholas Abbey, a recently renovated 17th-century sugar plantation. Never an actual abbey, the plantation is once again producing rum, which is aged in oak casks. Drying beach towels flap in seaborne breezes by Bathsheba, a fishing village on Barbados’s east coast.

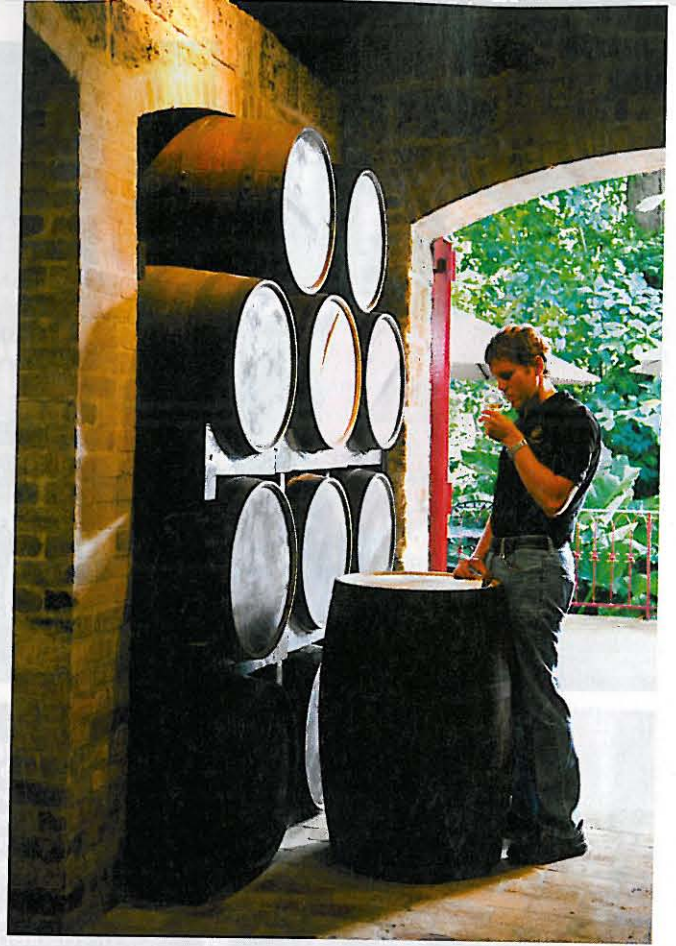
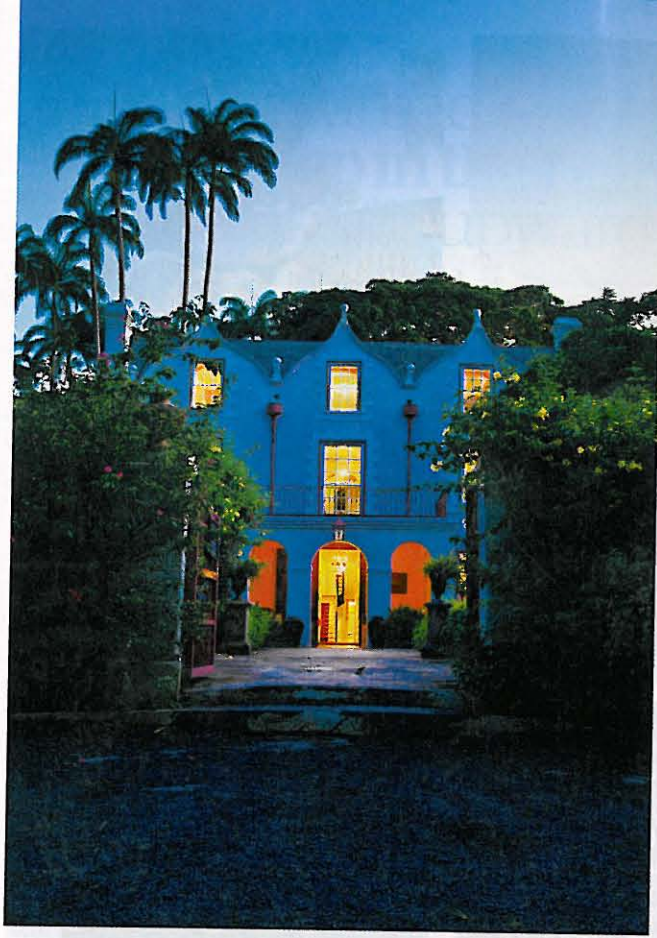
Little England—feeling capital, and the tourist-centric south coast, where I’ll cruise the funky-friendly stretch of cafés and clubs in St. Lawrence Gap. I will then venture over to what Barbadians (“Bajans”) consider the real Barbados: the rugged east coast and the traditional villages inland. All along I’ll mix it up with locals to get an unvarnished read on what at the moment is feeling like the most engaging island in the Caribbean Sea.

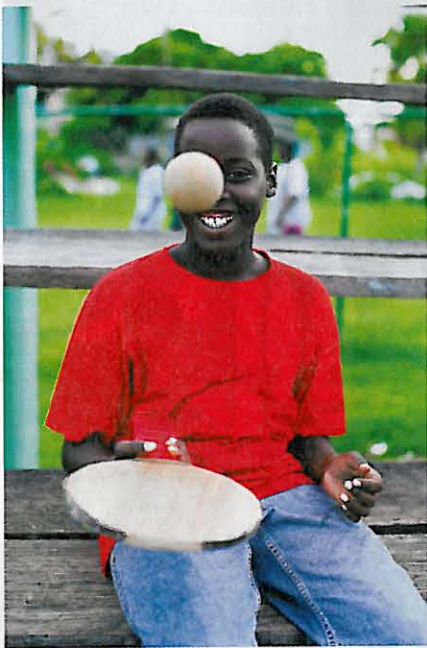
That will be my first mistake. Strictly speaking Barbados is not in the Caribbean Sea.

“We’re in the North Atlantic,” says Adrian Loveridge, my guide at the George Washington Museum, on an 18th-century plantation outside of Bridgetown. “Barbados sits on the edge of the Caribbean plate, to the east of the Windward Islands arc that traditionally divides the Caribbean from the Atlantic.”

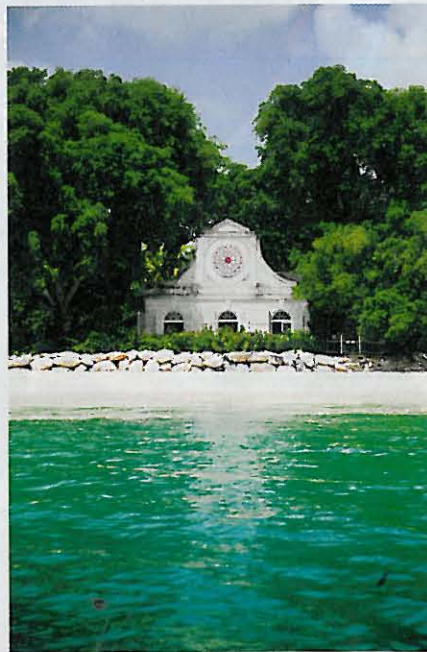
As Loveridge shows me the house where George Washington stayed for six weeks when he was 19 (his only foreign trip, ever; smart choice), I learn that this island has long had a clear sense of itself and its worth. Loveridge proudly informs me that a rule stating no taxation without representation was included in the Charter of Barbados more than a century before the Boston Tea Party. The island’s literacy rate, 99.7 percent, is higher than that in the U.S. (99 percent). And Barbados lays claim to one of the most stable governments in the hemisphere, attributable in part to 339 years of staunch British administration that ended with independence in 1966—although the island remains a member of the Commonwealth, with close ties to the Queen. How close? “Rumor is, Her Majesty wears underwear made of Barbados cotton,” whispers Loveridge.

Yet call it Little England, and you’ll find locals rolling their eyes. “Only half true,” a Bridgetown street vendor near Barbados’s British-style Parliament building tells me. “We may be little, but we’re not England.” Looking around, I see what he means: rum bars in lieu of pubs, soca music—blasting vans instead of double-decker buses, not to mention these barbecued pig tails I’m chewing on. But as I walk down Broad Street and up Swan, an unmistakable decorum hovers over these historic, orderly





Clockwise from top left: All grins as he bounces a ball on a Bajan-style plywood racket, a player awaits a game of road tennis, Barbados's popular adaptation of the Queen's tennis. Parishioners ready St. Peter's, one of the island's six original parish churches, for a service. Water babies: Olympic windsurfer Brian Talma walks his children to a local beach. Dramatic rock formations, such as boat-size Bathsheba Rock, mark the rugged east coast of Barbados. Many formations are visible from rooms at the louvered, seaside Atlantis Hotel. Spectators keep their eyes on their prizes at the Garrison Savannah horse-racing track. The coral-stone mansion named Heron Bay was modeled on the Palladio-designed Villa Barbaro in Italy and has hosted notable guests, including Winston Churchill and Bill Clinton. Grilled lobster tempts the palate at the Atlantis Hotel's restaurant.



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streets, overseen by the nattily dressed Royal Barbados Police, whose duties include greeting tourists and chiding schoolchildren for not tucking in their shirttails.

Under all of this apparent civility lurks the wound that has scarred so many Caribbean islands: slavery. When tobacco, cotton, and sugar plantations took off in Barbados's tropical climate, the British government shipped in thousands of new slaves from West Africa as labor. The island abolished slavery in 1834, but the psychology of slave and master would take generations to change.

So how does an island transcend its history of slavery to become what feels like the Welcome Wagon of the Caribbean? A clue comes the next day at Surfer's Point, on Barbados's southwest coast, where I go for a surfing tutorial at Zed's Surfing Adventures. At the end of the lesson—during which I paid close attention to Rule Number One: "Don't fall headfirst; we don't want your hard skull damaging our coral reef"—I clink beer bottles and exchange small talk with owner Zed Layson. When I note a wisp of Irish in his speech, he tells me he's fifth-generation Bajan, descended from prisoners consigned to Barbados from Ireland. "What a blessin' this was for them," he says, laughing. "They should have told their relatives, 'Commit a crime against the Crown and get sent to paradise!'" How, I ask, did those earlier settlers go about creating communities in this faraway land? "On a small island, it's all about sharing. We stem from our African slave culture and our British, Irish, Scottish, and Indian cultures, small flavorings that have fashioned a pepper pot of good livin'." Clink.

That spirit of sharing is evident everywhere at the weekly Friday-night fish fry in the fishing village of Oistins, on Barbados's south shore. Bajan cuisine revolves around seafood; British fare didn't make the cut. In fact, Brian Porteus, the chef at Cobbler's Cove Hotel, tells me Bajans don't eat much red meat; a McDonald's closed in less than a year. But you can stuff yourself to the gills with fresh fish here, as I find out while seated at one of the communal tables. When the paper plates begin piling up, live music takes over the fish fry, though in an unexpected way. As soca tunes blare forth, it's the tourists—the cruise-ship passenger in calf-high socks, the British mom restrained by embarrassed teenagers—not the locals who jump up as if at a tent revival to shake their booties. The Bajans glide around their own dance floor in nearby Lexie's Bar to the tunes you'd hear on late-night AM stations in 1960s Tallahassee. As Conway Twitty croons, John Baxter, age 81, tells me he's been coming here every Friday night for eight years. "We luv dis music," he says, adding with a wink, "and I got no shame." Then he twirls off with a woman half his age.

That dance floor, I notice, is on a miniature tennis court, which, just like the music, is part of the cultural puzzle here. I like to play tennis anywhere I go, so when a hotel pro mentioned road tennis, a popular island version of the sport representing a Bajan twist on Little England, I was intrigued.

"It started in the 1930s, when locals watched white folks play lawn tennis," explains McArthur Barrow, a road-tennis fanatic I've tracked down. "We weren't allowed in their clubs, so we invented our own game." Road tennis is ingenious in its resourcefulness—a low wood plank for a net, rackets made of plywood, a tennis ball

with the fuzz removed—and is played on any paved surface, often the middle of the street. "Each village or community has its road tennis champion, and people are fiercely loyal to him," Barrow tells me. "Guys compete with other communities: play all day, cook up food, and relax. It's part of our Bajan culture."

He hands me a Bajan racket of my own, then sets me up with an opponent. The players laugh at my attempts to connect with the ball, shouting advice: "Move de feet, get behind de ball." Five minutes into it, and I'm wearing the same grin as everyone else.

Yet another British-inspired tradition, the Sunday horse race at Garrison Savannah, offers its own glimpse into home-grown Bajan culture. "The race dates to the days of the planters," says a tanned man with tousled gray hair standing next to me. He introduces himself. "Cow...like the barnyard animal," then shares a surprising fact about Barbados horse racing: "Barbadians don't bet. They're too financially conservative." It's the tourists who do all the serious wagering. The islanders are content to picnic around the track's perimeter, enjoying the pageantry and the socializing.

As the horses thunder by, my pick wilts like bad lettuce. I tear my wager up—and it suddenly becomes clear: If you don't bet, you can't lose. I'd be smiling too if I still had \$20 in my pocket.

Before I leave, I press Cow for his real name: "Sir Charles Williams, knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 2000 for sports development."

Taken aback, I mumble, "Uh, you're British?"



“We Bajans meet on common ground, **eat the same food**, listen to the same music,” Hoad says. “It gives you a real nice together feeling.”



“One hundred percent Barbadian,” he sniffs. “My ancestors, however, were sent here as prisoners by Oliver Cromwell. My family’s been here for 356 years.”

Back in the 1600s, Cromwell’s man-catchers roamed Britain and Ireland to capture rebels and malcontents for forced labor on Barbadian plantations. Being “Barbadosed” was considered a fate worse than death. Most of their descendants, like Zed and Cow, are plugged into mainstream Bajan society, but I’d heard stories of “Redlegs,” or “Scotland Johnnies,” scraping out a living in remote pockets of the island. Poor and isolated, they were prone to chasing intruders with pitchforks.

Barbadian plantations, it turns out, were equal-opportunity exploiters. When they switched from tobacco to more lucrative sugar, enslaved Africans replaced the Redlegs many times over, and their labors turned Barbados into the “richest spote of ground in the wordell,” according to a British visitor to the island in the 1600s, Henry Whistler.

You won’t find much evidence of this slave history today, except for a statue of a rebel slave leader named Bussa that stands in the roundabout that spins me toward the island’s wind-combed east coast. I’m on my way to Bathsheba, an oceanside village consisting of little more than a trim Anglican church, a jaunty rum bar, a hammock shop, salt-weathered bungalows, and a few hotels along a scalloped coast studded with house-size rocks wreathed in surf. The area is still home to small communities of blond-haired, blue-eyed descendants of early Redlegs.

As I approach Bathsheba, kids toting surfboards jump to the side of the narrow road, surprised by a car prowling behind them. I crunch to a stop in a parking lot, joining a crowd gathered to watch a clutch of surfers jockey for position offshore.

I consider trying out my new surfing skills—until I bump into

Bottoms up: Bajan beachgoers (above) cartwheel on the sands along the island’s “Platinum” west coast. Prized thoroughbreds stabled at Barbados’s Turf Club enjoy water rubdowns (right, top) from their groomers. All wood, wicker, and whiling away the day, the Sea-U Guest House (right, bottom) in Bathsheba offers an escape from...well, everything.

Sea Cat. Squat and muscled at 49, he’s been riding waves here since the 1970s. “People lose their lives in this surf,” he warns me. “The Soup Bowl has a strong riptide racing up its middle.” Indeed, champion U.S. surfer Kelly Slater named it one of the world’s top three waves. Surely the locals won’t welcome sharing this world-class break with...um, the likes of me. “We don’t want that kind of feeling here,” Sea Cat assures me. “It was the white guys who taught us surfing. Now we get to surf with people from all over the world.”

I opt for caution and ease myself into a tidal pool pocked into the surf-foamed rock—a Jacuzzi patented by nature—as long-winged frigatebirds gyre overhead. I linger until the afternoon sun begins its slide into eventide, then head to the nearby Atlantis Hotel, a landmark built in the 1800s in the village of Tent Bay, for dinner. I find owner Andrew Warden sitting at the bar, newly refurbished along with the rest of what is now a boutique hotel, and ask him why he bought the property. “To keep it from falling apart; it was in bad shape.” He had it rebuilt in painstaking detail: The eight guest rooms feature four-poster beds and wood-plank floors and face out to the rolling waves. As Warden talks, I detect an off-island accent. How does an Aussie end up halfway around the world in Tent Bay?

“My mother is actually Barbadian,” he says, pointing to a wall behind me. “Those are my relatives.” I pivot around to see a sepia-toned photograph showing men with feral beards and haunted faces.

“Redlegs?”

“Yup,” he says. “People who look like that still live in the hills here.”

THE MORNING SUN IS glinting off distant waves as I hike a seaside trail from Bathsheba south to Bath.

I’m following the route of a 1930s railway that eroded into a ribbon path burrowing through wind-sheared tangles of sea grapes and along wild surfy beaches sprayed with rainbows. A mongoose stops to show off a hermit crab wriggling in its mouth before disappearing into the lianas. After 45 minutes, I break out over Martins Bay, then head inland, toward the hills.

The first one I see pops out of the canes, looking like the men in the photo: a straggly beard, pajama top, raggedy shorts—and clutching a long machete. He nods curtly, then recedes into the brush. I take a deep breath and continue down the two-track road. The second man I meet, Richard King, isn’t so shy. He’s well into his 70s and has lived here all his life, growing yams and other vegetables. He doesn’t know where his ancestors came from, but his twinkling blue eyes tell their own story. What’s the best thing about life in this place? “We’ve always had peace and quiet,” he says, his half-lidded eyes gazing across the rolling ocean. “I know the island’s changing. I just hope the quiet sticks around.”

I don’t come across a single disgruntled person here, as I meet the Fentys, the Baileys, and Ann Banfield, who has just finished





A vintage gas station recast as a boutique hotel and restaurant, the Lone Star attracts guests with its casual-chic styling and automotive-inspired details.

husking a pile of coconuts. “Ireland?” she says with a laugh. “I wouldn’t trade my life here for anywhere else.”

While this may be true for those with European roots, I wonder about those whose ancestors were shipped over from the Ghana slave forts. I drive inland to find the answer in one of the oldest nonwhite villages on Barbados. The road winds through fields of sugarcane hemmed by cabbage palms, past nameless hamlets ablaze with flame red poinciana. The place I’m looking for was founded half a century before the 1834 abolition of slavery, when a plantation owner deeded land to his slave mistress and her four children. But I can’t find Sweet Bottom on the map—for a reason, I discover when I finally stumble upon it. “The government think the name too crude, so they change it to Sweet Vale,” says Velda Merrick, one of a group of ladies in long flowered skirts and white blouses hoeing furrows of yam sprouts. The scene looks like a tableau from the 19th century. I ask Mrs. Merrick how she manages what looks to be backbreaking work. “Sun too hot, day too long, money’s no good, but it’s deh life we love,” she says, as the other women bob their heads in agreement. Walking back to my car, I find another woman coming up to me cupping something in her arms. “Okra,” she says simply, and hands me a batch with a dazzling smile. “Cut it up and cook in deh coconut water, oh so nice.”

So much hospitality is remarkable. To get perspective I swing by the village of Morgan Lewis to visit Richard Hoad, goat farmer and irascible columnist for Barbados’s *Nation* newspaper, whose family came from England in the 1850s to set up a business in Bridgetown. As we sit on his patio overlooking 21 acres of fields rolling down to seas flecked with whitecaps, I ask for his take on the island’s seemingly innate congeniality. “You can blame our

English heritage, which even the British seem to have lost,” he says. “And unlike our island neighbors, we weren’t influenced by more hooligan European cultures.” But it’s more than that. “We Bajans meet on common ground, eat the same food, listen to the same music,” Hoad continues. “We even think alike. It gives you a real nice together feeling.” And I’m now wondering if it’s something they put in the coconut water.

HOW DID GETTING BARBADOSSED change from a virtual death sentence to a downright heartwarming experience? I chalk it up to the special alchemy between the Barbadians and their magical island. It creates moments when you suddenly feel part of everything around you. And you don’t have to be Bajan to experience it.

My moment occurs on my last night, driving through Speights-town, where I see a crowd watching a road-tennis match. They stare at me in my Topsiders and wrinkle-free Oxford as if I’d just jumped out of an Eddie Bauer catalogue. But when they spot the Bajan racket in my hand, they rush me into the lineup, and soon I’m facing The Rock. He gives me no quarter. I’m in the zone, though, and seeing the ball as big as a breadfruit. The Rock hits a sitter, and I slam it with all the topspin I can muster, sending the ball between his legs. The players on the sidelines, the little kids, even the grandmother in the window, clap and laugh as I stand there with a loopy smile under the amber halo of a streetlight. With my heart feeling as big as a continent, I’m pretty sure I’ve just been Barbadosed.

Moab-based award-winning writer CHARLES KULANDER is a contributing editor. Photographer SUSAN SEUBERT’s coverage of Washington, D.C., appeared in the May-June 2010 issue.