

Marvel arch

Discover a different kind of Caribbean island in Anguilla, with no all-inclusive resorts but plenty of places for locals and tourists to rub shoulders, writes **Joanna Booth**

I landed in Anguilla to find sand like caster sugar, picture-perfect palm trees, killer rum cocktails and Johnny Cakes as light and fluffy as my hotel pillows. So far, so quintessentially Caribbean. But it didn't take me long to realise this is no cookie-cutter island.

For starters, there's not a single all-inclusive hotel. In a destination with beaches the quality of Anguilla's, that doesn't happen by accident. Stacey Liburd, director of tourism for Anguilla Tourist Board, explained that it's a deliberate choice – and not one the island plans to change soon.

After my stay on this British Overseas Territory, set at the northern tip of the Lesser Antilles, I can see why. Visitors to these pristinely powdered shores aren't predominantly driven by price – this is a luxury market, where the quest is for quality.

But there's another reason all-inclusive isn't the board basis to suit Anguilla. Here, inclusivity means people coming together, not tempting tourists to stay in resort with added extras. On the beaches, in the restaurants and even in the high-end hotels, tourists and locals regularly rub shoulders – a relaxed, sociable integration that is rare on many other islands.

BREAKING BREAD

Wages are higher here than in most Caribbean countries, so the economic disparity between islanders and incomers is less marked. At Salt, the signature restaurant at Four Seasons Anguilla – with its wraparound ocean views, hand-crafted cocktails and main dishes that start from \$34 – I hadn't expected to see so many local couples and families enjoying a special celebration dinner ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Sandy Ground Beach; Anguilla Summer Festival; CeBlue Villas

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Kristopher Kettner; Alexandre Julien; Zuri Wilkes Photography; Flash Parker

alongside the hotel guests. And at Elvis' Beach Bar, a laid-back, toes-in-the-sand spot with beers, big screens and reggae beats, we met other tourists propping up the bar alongside resident regulars. This mingling, infrequent in many Caribbean destinations, is commonplace in Anguilla.

Eating well is easy, whether you're in a swish hotel or a shack on the beach, with local seafood playing a starring role. Tasty's is the spot for a slap-up breakfast, with sweeping views over Sandy Ground salt pond. Recommend lunch at Da'Vida, right on the shores at Crocus Bay, and for upscale dinners, suggest Veya, where the first-floor terrace is open to the surrounding canopy, so you feel as if you're eating in a treehouse.

ISLAND EXPERIENCES

Every corner of this small, low-lying, sleepy island feels safe. Hiring a car is common – we buzzed around in

“Offshore cays Sandy Island is a say-what-you-see title – a bank of perfect powder with a smattering of palm trees

brightly coloured Mokes (\$140 a day from mokeanguilla.com), popping to take pictures at the island's famous rock formation The Arch, to see heritage plantation site Wallblake House and to check out Anguilla's many glorious beaches. There are 33 of them, with some of the best sand quality in the Caribbean, so clients can choose one to suit their mood, from lively Sandy Ground to quiet Cove Bay.

Secluded and small but perfectly formed, Little Bay is a must-visit for

any remotely adventurous tourist. While you can clamber down a cliff on to the beach, by far the best way to reach it is by kayak. We went with Sea Blue Excursions (\$95 for two hours, seablue.ai@gmail.com), paddling the short but pleasant distance from neighbouring Coral Bay in immaculate transparent kayaks, before pulling our craft on to the sand and taking a snorkel tour with guide Kiron Hodge, who pointed out reef fish and rays, and showed us how locals use the crumbling, porous clay from the cliffside to make a saltwater facial scrub.

A popular day out for tourists and Anguillians alike is to head to one of the yet-more-laid-back offshore cays. Sandy Island is a say-what-you-see title – a bank of perfect powder with a smattering of palms. Robinson Crusoe would have loved the extra comforts: a clutch of loungers and parasols, plus a brightly coloured beach restaurant serving fresh fish and ➤

5
OF THE
BEST

FESTIVALS



Moonsplash

Held to coincide with the full moon in March or April, this reggae festival showcases homegrown musicians and global stars.

Festival del Mar

One of the Caribbean's biggest seafood festivals runs every Easter weekend in the fishing village of Island Harbour. Visit for great food, live music and swimming, boat and crab races.

Anguilla Culinary Experience

This food and wine festival is hosted at luxury resorts, private villas and restaurants, with dinners, tastings and competitions. The 2025 dates are April 30-May 3.

Anguilla Day Regatta

Boat racing is Anguilla's national sport, with events from February through till August. Catch the round-the-island boat race on May 30, Anguilla Day, from Sandy Ground.

Anguilla Summer Festival

This carnival-style event has music, dancing, street parades and beach parties, and runs from late July into early August.

DESTINATIONS

WINTER SUN | ANGUILLA



FROM LEFT: Zemi Beach House; parade at Anguilla Summer Festival; banana-flavoured rum drink PICTURES: Zuri Wilkes Photography; Allen Tsai Photography

frozen cocktails. (Boat transfers \$40 return, sandyislandoffice@gmail.com).

For even more local immersion, explore the tours offered by Quest Experiences (whatwedoinanguilla.com/quest). Hosted by islanders, options include learning to make Johnny Cakes, guided hikes to the island's natural limestone caves and even salt picking at the islands' ponds – an industry dating back to the 1600s.

STAYS WITH SOUL

Luxury lovers are spoilt for choice with the island's big-name brands and small-scale boutiques. There's Four Seasons Anguilla, where Eddie Murphy got married this year; Belmond's Cap Juluca, another firm celebrity favourite; the sprawling Aurora Anguilla with its own golf course; and grand dame Malliouhana, which celebrated its 40th anniversary this year.

With its own share of celebrities – Paris Hilton recently honeymooned here – Zemi Beach House is an equally idyllic hotel on beautiful Shoal Bay, fronting on to a

“ Learn to make Johnny Cakes, enjoy guided hikes of the limestone caves and even go salt picking at the islands' ponds

wide stretch of white sand. The 76 rooms are modern Caribbean chic, with white walls, wood furniture and vast, marble bathrooms and are set in low-rise blocks, with even entry-level options a spacious 65sq m. The huge, two and three-bedroom penthouses and beachfront suites come with kitchens and private pools and really have the wow factor.

Couples will adore the tranquil, adult-only pool, the watersports and the low-lit Rhum Room with 140 brands to taste under the guidance of Stacey the 'rummelier'. And that's before they've visited

the extraordinary Thai House Spa. Climbing the stairs to my treatment room, housed in an authentic 300-year-old wooden pagoda, I felt momentarily transported to southeast Asia.

Families are well-catered for too, with connecting rooms, a kids' club and a free-to-use tennis court. Out of sight from guests, an impressive array of solar panels mean the resort is 60% powered by renewable energy.

Villas also suit Anguilla's typically independent travellers, and there are many private options to rent. A great middle ground is CeBlue Villas, a collection of one to five-bedroom villas with spectacular views perched on the hillside above Crocus Bay. All have private pools; there's a shared gym, loungers and beach service at Crocus Bay; and the responsive concierge team can organise breakfast deliveries, private chefs, babysitters, restaurant reservations and excursions. Clients will find they barely have to lift a finger – who needs an all-inclusive when villa life is this stress-free? **TW**



GETTING THERE

✿ Most UK visitors fly via Antigua, making the final 45-minute leg of the journey via a scheduled service or a private charter. TransAnguilla's scheduled services start from \$188.50 one-way, while Anguilla Air Services' private charters cost from \$3,250 one-way on a plane holding up to seven passengers.

✿ Alternatively, arrive by boat from Saint Martin. A semi-private airport shuttle with Calypso Charters takes 25 minutes and costs \$75 each way. Fly to Saint Martin with Air France or KLM via Paris or Amsterdam.

Find out more at ivisitanguilla.com

BOOK IT

Caribtours offers a seven-night stay in a Garden View King Room with Private Balcony at Zemi Beach House on a room-only basis, including KLM flights from Heathrow, ferries and airport transfers, from £6,465 per person, based on two sharing, departing February 24, 2025. caribtours.co.uk

Abercrombie & Kent offers a five-night stay at Malliouhana on a bed-and-breakfast basis, from £4,495 per person based on two sharing, including flights and private transfers. abercrombiekent.co.uk