

Waist deep in the bath-warm Caribbean Sea, I'm having a cuddle with Love Sponge. Don't stop reading - that isn't a nauseating nickname for my husband and I'm not indulging in an unforgiveable public display of affection. I'm just getting up close and personal with a stingray.

A visit to Stingray City is one of Antigua's most popular attractions, and as I cradle the smooth weight of this friendly southern stingray in my arms, it's easy to see why. These gentle giants aren't forced to be here and there are no fences penning them in - they are wild creatures.

The Stingray City team has spent years establishing a relationship of trust with the rays, and it's a privilege to watch how comfortable they are around humans. The promise of a slap-up squid meal has its appeal too.

I hold out a cuttlefish and within seconds a ray has zoomed over and hovered it out of my hand - they don't have teeth, so all you experience is the strong pull of suction from their mouths. Even with a little jostling for food, I never feel anything other than safe.

A 10-minute boat ride from Seaton's Village in the northeast of the island has brought us to

a floating pontoon on a shallow sandbank.

Scuba masks are on offer so we can snorkel with the rays, but the water is so calm and shallow that if visitors merely want to watch and hold the rays they barely need to be able to swim, just stand. A photographer is on hand to take professional photos, but the team are happy to step in and snap away if visitors have their own waterproof cameras.

After about an hour, we head back to land and are soon having a complimentary rum punch and comparing our photos. As excursions go, it's just right - plenty of excitement but no

danger, and even accounting for hotel transfers, it's doable in half a day, so you can still fit in some serious sunlounging if you want.

▶ A PERFECT BALANCE

Getting things just right seems to be an Antiguan talent - this is an island that would suit Goldilocks. Nothing's too extreme. Hotels aren't huge or built cheek by jowl in vast resorts. Yet most properties have enough rooms to offer great choice and facilities, and they tend to be set near villages, so they're not completely isolated.

"The island has a really comfortable feel," says travel [▶](#)

Rays of sunshine

Joanna Booth finds the pace of life just right in Antigua

WHAT THE AGENTS THOUGHT



Claire Horne, Travel Counsellors: "I've already got clients in mind for Antigua. The value in summer is excellent and I'd throw Blue Waters in as a wild card for families looking for a two-week all-inclusive stay in August."

Danielle Nairne, Abercrombie & Kent: "I was really impressed by Blue Waters' Living Retreats programme. It's more than personal training and is something I would sell to clients."

Richard Penny, Co-operative Travel: "The Antiguan are so friendly and welcoming, and I was very impressed by the local food too – always fresh ingredients and served with a smile."

Kelly Edwards, Virgin Holidays: "The island's scenery was so beautiful – something our catamaran trip gave me the chance to appreciate. It's a wonderful experience and would suit everyone, from families to honeymooners."



LEFT: Agents at Ana's on the Beach

RIGHT: Joanna Booth tries ziplining

BELOW: New Rock Cottage at Blue Waters



→ counsellor Claire Horne. "It's not a 'see and be seen' island, and it's really easy to embrace local culture."

We're here on a fam trip with the Antigua & Barbuda Tourism Authority, though learning more about this small, laid-back island has felt far more like play than work – particularly from the deck of a catamaran.

Sailing on *Mystic* with Tropical Adventures Antigua, we track the coast south from St John, with Joel, our host from Antigua Tourism Authority, pointing out the different hotels from the deck as we pass – surely the best format for site inspections!

Soon it's time to stop and snorkel



It's not a 'see and be seen' island, and it's really easy to embrace local culture

on Cades Reef, and despite the fact the wind has made the water slightly choppy, there's still plenty of fish to spot. Lunch and free-flowing punch follow, and then a stop on Turtle Beach. The crew creates a friendly atmosphere and the wide age group

of passengers is free to have as lively or as relaxed a cruise as they please.

For something a little more high energy, recommend Antigua Rainforest Zipline Tours. Visitors can choose from the full house Zipline and Challenge Course with 28 different elements, to the pocket-sized six-zipline Canopy Tour, which nevertheless includes The Screamer – the longest, fastest, and thus scariest, line. The course is enough to get your heart thudding, but doable even for scaredy-cats – they'll tell you that their youngest participant was a four-year-old child. If nothing else, that shames most into making the first leap, and after that, nerves dissolve into pure adrenaline. →



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LEFT: Shirley Heights

RIGHT: Living Retreats programme at Blue Waters



▶ WHEN NIGHT FALLS

Antigua hits a nice balance with its nightlife, too. It's unlikely that clients are going to be bothered by nightclub noise in their hotel room, but there's a sprinkling of beach bars, including Ana's on the Beach, where the seats in the restaurant, the hot pink stools along the bar, and the cabanas



Antigua has it licked - it's neither too big nor too small and neither too crowded nor too isolated

on the sand all benefit from gorgeous Dickenson Bay views.

For a burst of local flavour in a sit-down setting, you can't do much better than brightly-painted, low-lit Papa Zouk in St John's. It specialises in two of Antigua's favourite things - fish and rum. Rather than faff about with a menu, your server will sit down and talk you through the selection of both - and we tried everything from conch to lion fish, all washed down with Ti' Punch, which gave our jetlag the heave-ho.

The quintessential Antiguan party takes places at Shirley Heights on Thursdays and Sundays, and yet again the mixture is spot on, with a cosy blend of locals and tourists both enjoying the panoramic views over Nelson's Dockyard. An early evening barbecue to the backing of a tinkling steel band gives way to heavier rhythms, live bands and dancing later in the evening.

▶ STAYING IN SHAPE

For some, holidays are purely about relaxation, and spacious rooms, flower-filled grounds and numerous pools at Blue Waters Resort & Spa on the north

coast provide ample opportunity for this.

But there are guests who want to use their holiday time to rebalance their lifestyle, and the hotel's Living Retreats programme, new this year, is designed with them in mind.

A one-on-one, completely personalised service, Living Retreats stays begin with a series of body evaluations measuring everything down to your zinc levels. The subsequent programme takes into account each guest's individual needs, so yes, weight loss might be part of it, but goals can also include stress management, nutrition, and sleep. The programme includes everything from classes in pilates, yoga, boxing and kayaking to spa treatments. All the hotel's restaurants mark the healthiest options on their menus, so making the right choice is easy. Bookings through a tour operator require a three-night minimum stay on the programme, bookings through the hotel allow guests to dip in on a day-to-day basis.

The Living Retreats programme is another example of the light touch we've come

to expect on Antigua. It's not a hardcore bootcamp experience, and it won't make guests feel out of place among other holidaymakers, but it does allow Blue Waters to tap into the ever-growing wellness market. So for clients that like a

compromise, Antigua has it licked - it's neither too big nor too small, neither too crowded nor too isolated, and can be as lively or relaxed as you wish. The only thing clients are likely to find is that their holiday in Antigua is too short. **tw**



LEFT: Steel band at Shirley Heights

✔ Tried & Tested

BLUE WATERS RESORT & SPA

I wasn't here long before I realised why this hotel was chosen to host Prince Harry during his stay on the island. Yes, the rooms are huge and beautifully, traditionally furnished. The food, particularly at new beach restaurant Carolyn's and at the refurbished fine dining spot Bartley's, is delicious. Staff are attentive and friendly, with everyone from gardeners to senior management stopping to greet guests and creating a truly friendly atmosphere. But what

makes this a right royal stay is the relaxed seclusion. The Cove Suites and Villas are dotted among 17 acres of grounds, where hummingbirds flit among the hibiscus, frangipani and bougainvillea, and multiple pools mean you can always find a quiet spot to sunbathe - a blessing, even for those of us without blue blood.

Book it: Double rooms at Blue Waters start from £265 a night including breakfast. bluewaters.net

