

Antigua (2010)

We had a family reunion in Antigua to celebrate Mum's birthday. We chose that island because none of us had visited it before. My sister, Patti arranged for us to stay at the Jolly Beach Resort and it was an excellent get-away. The beach at the resort was postcard worthy and we discovered it was calm late in the evening. We also spent a lot of time in the pool. And we all enjoyed the birthday dinner party for the guest of honour very much.

Although the all-inclusive life was good (I had a brown sugar scrub followed by a massage one day), some of us ventured out on a short island tour and visited Nelson's Dockyard and Shirley Heights. Nelson's Dockyard is an historic marine monument with an imposing line of columns leading out to sea and quaint Colonial buildings that included a bakery and craft shops. I really enjoyed that visit. The view from Shirley Heights was spectacular. I wondered if General Shirley for whom the Heights were named was the same British Governor after whom Fort Shirley in Dominica was named so I googled it when I returned home and found a reference that said it was indeed the same person.

We had a few laughs on that same tour as the guide was very intense and would stop the mini-van in the middle of the road to think before answering our questions. At one point he stopped the vehicle to tell us all about pineapples growing on the side of the road except that all the windows were up and he closed the door behind him so we could not hear anything he said. It was at that point I finally begged the group to stop asking him questions – counting on the fact that he would not be able to hear my plea from where he was standing.

Another day we went to St. Johns and did some shopping in the duty free stores there. There was a cluster of shops including a wine store, pottery store and an Australian ice-cream shop that formed a peaceful little grouping which was just one street away from the downtown thoroughfare. Keeb sat near a drummer in an open square and helped him "drum" up business by suggesting the drummer remove the money from his box so there was room for more. One tourist took a photo with the drummer but did not tip him so Keeb yelled after them "Cheapo!". The tourist returned and added some money.

The entertainment at the resort each night was centred around guest participation: karaoke, dancing competitions and one night they had a "name that tune" contest and between Keeb and one of my cousins, they knew most of the songs. There was one particularly smug American guy who kept running up to answer the questions and by the end of the night they were feeding him wrong information on the songs. Another night the resort held a bonfire on the beach with Antiguan dancers dressed in native costumes doing African dancing, limbo and drumming. I thought the drumming was great, but Keeb took issue with the Caribbean stereotypes they were perpetuating. Of course the hotel guests just loved the show and took part in it. I spent a while trying to get one good shot of the show but my digital camera was not up to the task.

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On the last day, Keeb and I went to explore the tiny shopping plaza near the resort. It was mostly souvenir and marine shops but we found a coffee shop called Java Jo Jo's with local art, the ubiquitous world music cds and a decent collection of interesting books on sale. I bought one called "Passing Through" (short stories set in the Caribbean) by Colin Channer.

The ride back to the airport was by far the most hair-raising part of the holiday – Mum asked the driver a question about the sugar mills so he fired up his DVD (while driving), put in an Antiguan tourism DVD (while driving), skipped to the part on the sugar industry (while driving) and then proceeded to point out the parts of the sugar mill on the DVD screen (while driving). By the time he got to listing off the crank shaft etc. my life had passed before me more than once and I finally told him to stop it and concentrate on driving to which he responded he does this all the time. I was scared he was going to overtake someone while enlightening us on the mills just to prove he could multi-task!

There was some concern about where Mum's cake had been stored after the party and it did not help that apparently the dinner buffet had featured birthday cake as part of the desserts one night. But everything turned out fine, the Mum's cake was in fact produced and the only thing she had to do was unwrap the foil for airport security to see that it was just cake.

Speaking of security, I did not look closely at one of my gifts before packing it into my hand luggage and it turned out to contain three cheese knives, one of which was a lethal looking two-pronged affair. I was so nervous when it was unsheathed I, I told them they could keep the whole set, but the security personnel were very nice and just took the scariest knife away. That the Antiguan's did not assume pernicious intent was a relief. This is the second time I was given the benefit of the doubt. I remember the x-ray machine picked up a long-lost Swiss Army knife in my backpack at the Alaskan airport security and I was treated very kindly by the officer who walked me back to the baggage so I could check it – he shared that the exact thing had happened to him on a camping trip, so he was sympathetic.

All in all it was a memorable and fun holiday.