

## Caribbean Islands - Alvina

Ask people what the word Caribbean means to them and most will talk of turquoise lagoons, plenty of sun, steel drums and Bob Marley! But the Caribbean islands are much more than that. The four that we visited on this cruise of a lifetime are all totally different from one another and all have their own unique flavour.

The first island, Antigua, was a British colony until it became self governing in 1981. It boasts 365 beaches, one for every day of the year, and yes, the sand is white and soft, and the turquoise water is filled with colourful Parrot fish and yellow tailed Snapper.

The main town of St John's is rather down at heel and the people are poor, friendly and laid back, living in faded wooden shacks with tin roofs. Music escapes from open windows, bars, restaurants, and from the ferry boats in the harbour. Crickets sing in the evening, black and yellow humming birds sip nectar from orange hibiscus flowers and pelicans fish from the pier.

A Rastafarian promises to give Owain "sumfin fo' yo' sunburn mon, aw natural" He fishes in his bag and pulls out a sharp knife and something green which he hacks into small pieces. He then squeezes the resulting sap onto Owain's face, arms and legs. Then we realise that the miracle cure is in fact Aloe Vera and not Ganja as Alvina had suspected!

Our second island, Guadeloupe, is one of the French West Indies, and its capital Pointe a Pitre is very French in character. The people are tall, slim and elegant and there are many fancy boutiques full of chic Parisian clothing.

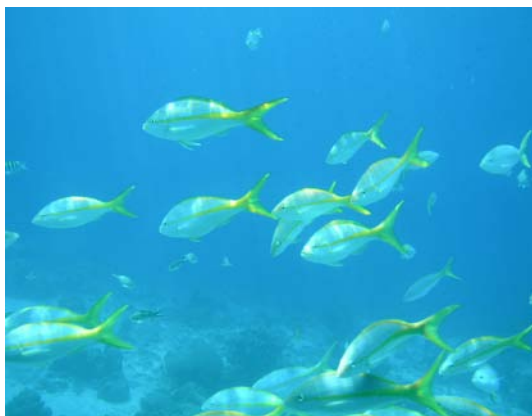
The colourful quayside market sells strange fish, many types of spices and material to make the orange and green plaid national costume. The buildings are made of coral which has been cement-rendered, Bougainvillea scrambles unchecked over the walls and up to the corrugated tin roofs. There is even a fading Art Deco cinema - again with tin roof!

The third island we visited was Curacao, one of the Netherlands Antilles just off the coast of Venezuela. It is a prosperous island with many offshore banks, a jewellery quarter and designer names in the shops. The

buildings are all brightly coloured Dutch style houses with red tile roofs and apart from the weather; we could have been in Amsterdam!

The whole of Willemstad, the capital, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the city is clean, tidy and well cared for. The people are friendly and most speak Spanish, French and English as well as their own language. The famous Curacao liqueur is made from orange peel and can be flavoured with chocolate, coffee or peppermint. The liqueur is the only possible use for the oranges which do not grow well in the poor soil here, and apparently even the gulls will not eat them!

A trip in a glass bottomed boat shows the fantastic array of multicoloured fishes and corals around the reefs, and a walk through the beautiful gardens of the Hilton hotel shows orchids, ginger lilies, lime green butterflies and a green iguana which scuttles off into the undergrowth.



Reef fish Curacao



Uninhabited island San Blas, Panama

We travel overnight to our next port of call, the San Blas Archipelago. Just a handful of the 360 islands are inhabited by the poor, indigenous Kuna Indians, who live in thatched huts on stilts near the beach. A barbecue is arranged by the ship's crew on one of the beaches, but we need to leave soon to take our place in the queue for the Panama Canal.