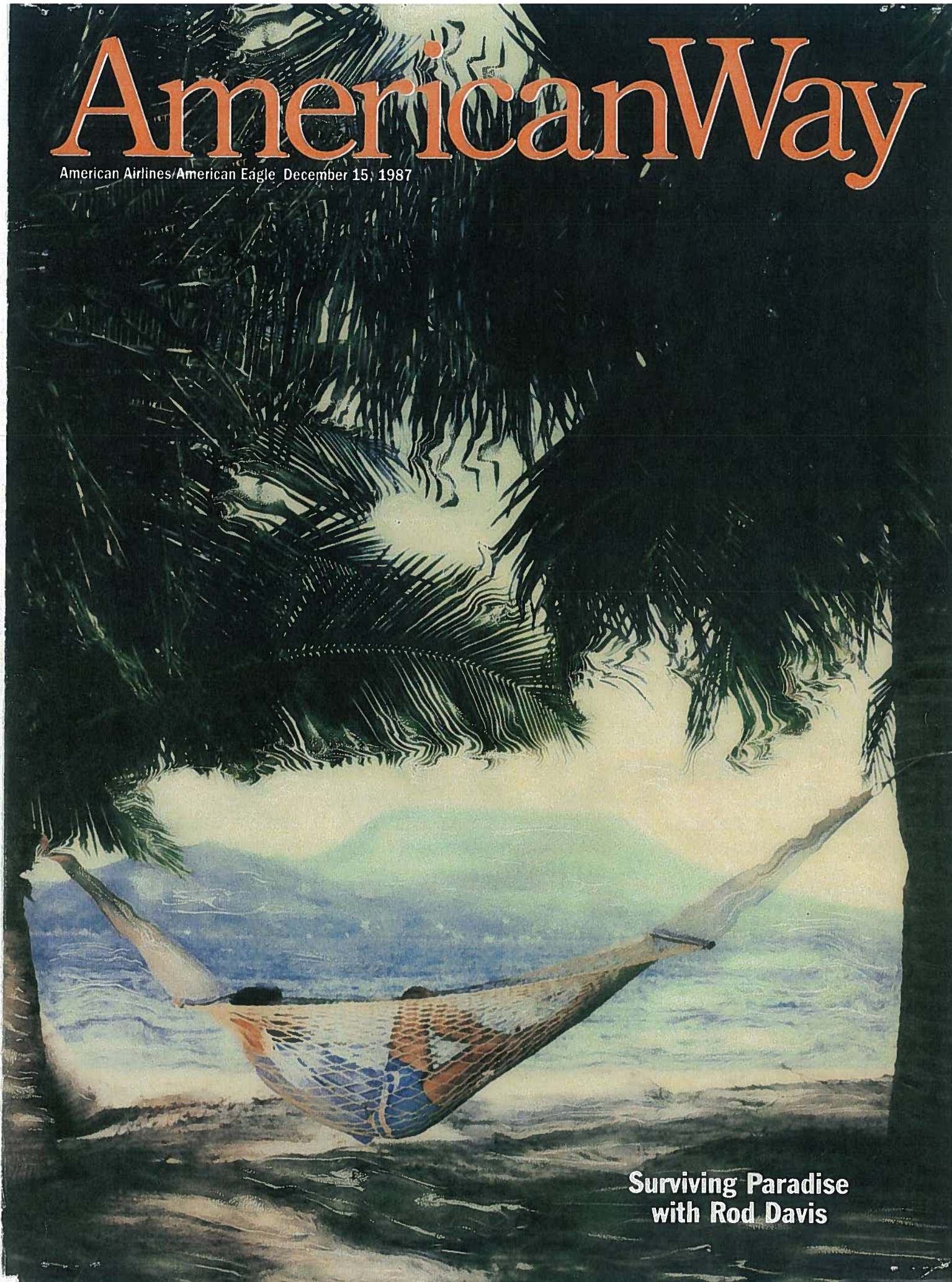


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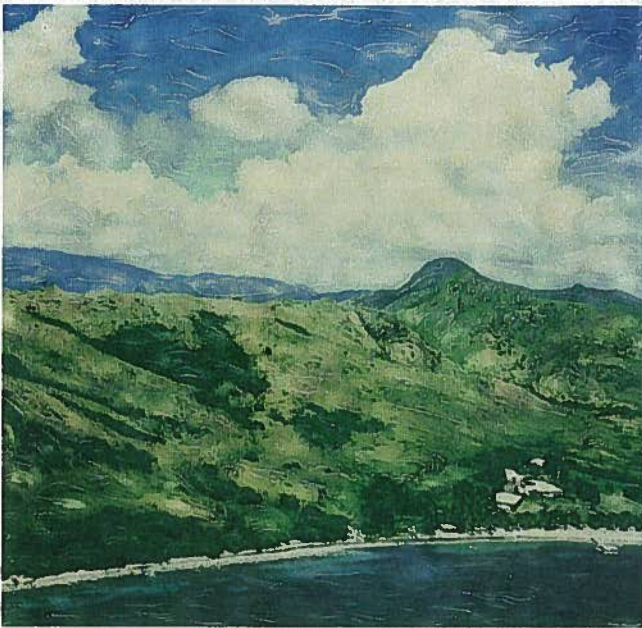


**Surviving Paradise
with Rod Davis**

FEAR AND LOAFING IN THE CARIBBEAN

BY ROD DAVIS PHOTOS BY MICHAEL GOING

Anybody can climb a mountain, conquer the stock market, raise a family, or run a marathon. But who can take a week in paradise? A tale of endurance and triumph.



*A working definition
of paradise lay
around me if I would
just calm down.*

I

THE DAY the fever broke, and I let go, I was running past the inland salt pond on the southern peninsula of St. Kitts. The road out of Banana Bay, a secluded beach with one small hotel and three honeymooning couples, was alternately sandy and full of ankle-breaking rocks, washed-out ruts. On each side of me, thick tropical vegetation hemmed in the route. A little ahead I could see the green volcanic hills which pock the central spine of the Lesser Antilles island discovered by Columbus in 1493, the French and British later on, and a cult of vacationers in more recent times. The fever was not a physical infirmity, it was a malady of consciousness. I had come here three days earlier to relax, and had not done so. The sky was blue, the lobster fresh, and the Caribbean clear, and I had been bored. Antsy. Who needed this getting-away stuff when there was so much to be done in the Real World?

But running down the hilly road, utterly alone at the nether edge of a turkey-leg-shaped flyspeck on the map, I stopped thinking about obligations. A working definition of paradise lay around me if I would just calm down. A small path for a Land Rover opened to my right. Grass and bushes grew up over the wheel tracks and half-cloaked the entrance, but I turned in. A few hundred feet down, the trail yielded to a white sand beach ringed with seaweed, and a turquoise bay. Deserted.

I walked to the surf and drenched my cap. It was



plenty hot. The coolness of the sea revived me. Two miles across the Narrows lay the sister island of Nevis, where I would later suffer something like enchantment, but for now the sloughing of my real-world anxieties was sufficient. Kicking along the seaweed I noticed a bit of yellow nylon cord, the kind fishermen use. Recently my daughter had tied a multicolored, woven band around my left wrist, and I hers, so we would remember each other while she lived in Colorado, and I in Texas. I thought the yellow cord would be a good addition, so I tied it on and pulled the knot snug with my teeth and right hand. I thought: This talisman will always be my transportation to a place I might need to be when I cannot be here again. But nylon will not hold tight. Today the cord sits on my desk: It is the run from Banana Bay, the full moon over Nevis, and the secret of all escape. It is a line into myself.

II

Basseterre, the capital of St. Kitts, surrounds a bay on the southern belly of the island, anchoring an economy based mostly on sugar cane but increasingly on tourism. It is not Jamaica, not even St. Maarten; except for a burst of activity during the season — Thanksgiving to Easter — it is the kind of place you go to only if you want to go nowhere. Solitude is the selling point; isolation is the attraction.

I had not known that before arrival. Truthfully, I had not known *anything* about St. Kitts. Who does? It's only 68 square miles, and even if you add the 35

square miles of Nevis, with which it is allied in independent, though rivalrous, statehood under the British Commonwealth, the twin-island country of 45,000 people grips the awareness of most of us with the ferocity of, say, upper Hackensack.

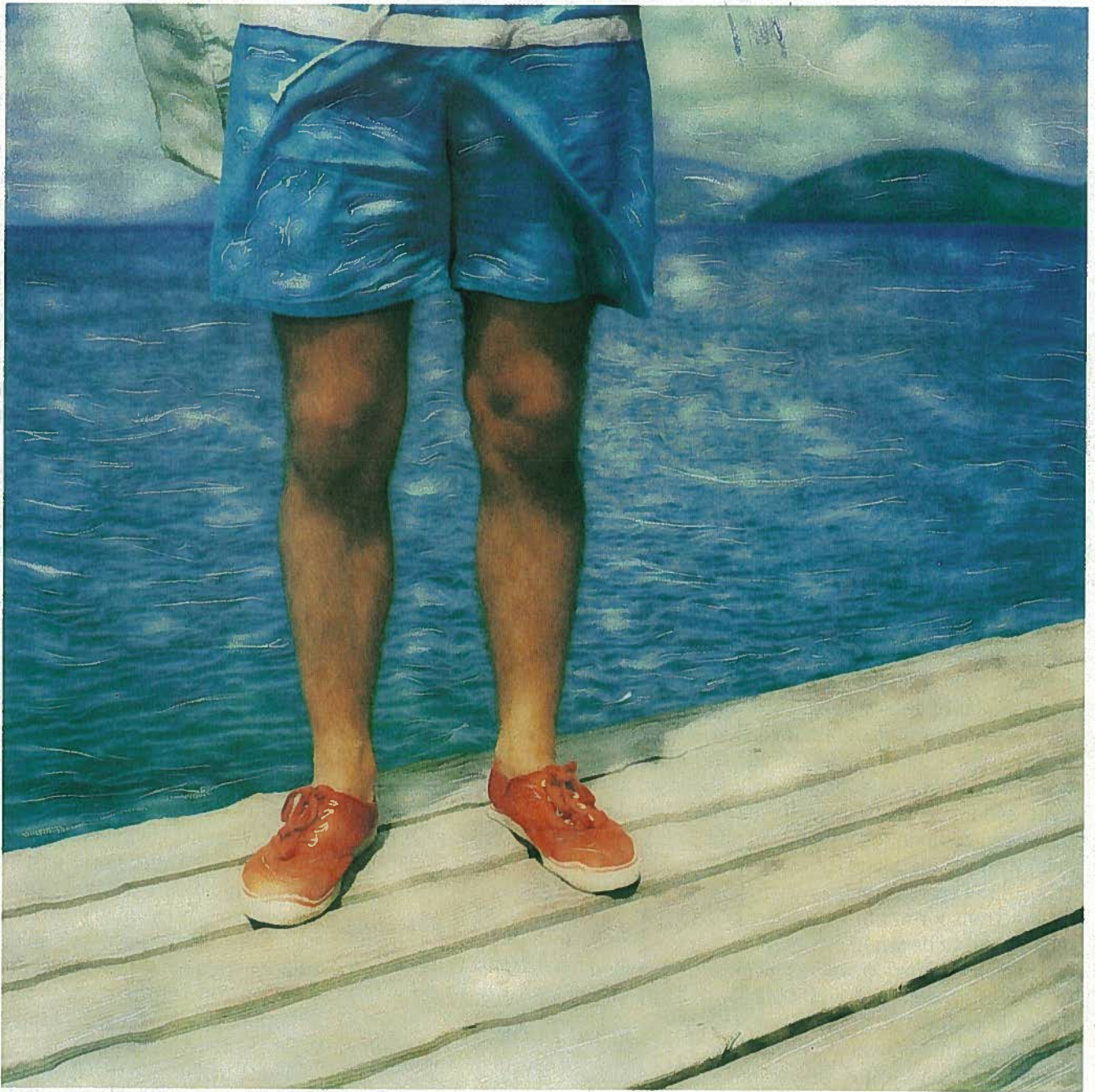
My initial impression was that I'd come to the wrong place. Night life was nonexistent, and if you didn't come with a mate, you'd better have brought a good book. I had two or three magazines. On the morning of my arrival, I toyed with breakfast on the dining deck of the OTI (Ocean Terrace Inn) and figured this would be the longest week of my life. The surroundings were pleasant — picture-postcard scenery — but I couldn't figure out why Robert Redford, Caroline Kennedy, Robin Leach, and the Queen of England, among others, had chosen these islands for getaways. Get away being my state of mind.

I decided to walk into town. Maybe something would click; a quick fix for a nagging funk. I made my way down the manicured OTI hillside grounds to a two-lane road hugging Basseterre Bay. Along the shore, fishermen had pulled in their skiffs and were taking their catches to the central market. The town was plain but not unattractive — modest homes and shops bunched together over the years. I turned up a side alley and skimmed the back streets. The business of everyday life proceeded, oblivious to my intrusion. Eventually I noticed people looking at me and I realized I seemed in danger of melting. They call this the tropics for a reason. Sweat beads covered my head and my clothes were soaked. I mopped my brow as if it would do any good. I would adjust, but

If you didn't come with a mate, you'd better have brought a good book.

feeling like a dishrag my first day wasn't helping my mood. I came to an old church, from which tower you were supposed to be able to see the town, but it was closed. I went on toward the central plaza, a traffic circle known, English-style, as the Circus.

The English got St. Kitts from the French after the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. The two imperial powers had carried their European competition to the West Indies almost from the first colonization in 1623 by Thomas Warner, and after exterminating the aboriginal Carib and Anawak tribes in a bloody massacre in 1629 had carved the place up — English in the middle, French at both ends. The biggest shootout took place at Brimstone Hill, a fortress built by the British on the west side of the island. It was conquered by the French after a siege in 1782, but ceded back to the English the following year after Versailles. Both powers imported slaves to work their plantations, so that the population of St. Kitts/Nevis today is predominantly African, with



I'm pretty sure we were talking about scuba diving and how he had speared a big fish. Either that or he himself had recently been speared.



the cultural ambiance from *That Upon Which The Sun Never Sets*. From its language to its bureaucracy, St. Kitts/Nevis is a Caribbean replication of England. A cab driver one morning told me he was tired because he'd risen at 3 AM to listen to a test match between Australia and the West Indies. Cricket.

I cruised the shops around the Circus. Wall's Bookstore had a good selection of maps and paperbacks, and there was a record store adjacent. I tried to figure the marketing motif: a half-dozen wall posters of scantily clad women, a few bins of calypso and reggae music, and a glass case full of Christian cassettes. Across the street a sporting goods store sold snor-

keling gear. And cricket bats. I bought some cards and went to the post office for stamps and then found a table on the second-story balcony of the Ballahoo Café to write home to tell friends I wasn't at all sure what this place was about.

I looked over the railing of the Ballahoo at the taxis waiting around the Circus. Canadian and British banks topped the circle, and along the opposite perimeter were overpriced tourist clothing stores. I ordered a second orange juice and told myself I was getting pretty judgmental for a new boy in town. The juice and a fresh breeze pulled me back. I chatted with the waitress, whose friendliness I had been too tense to



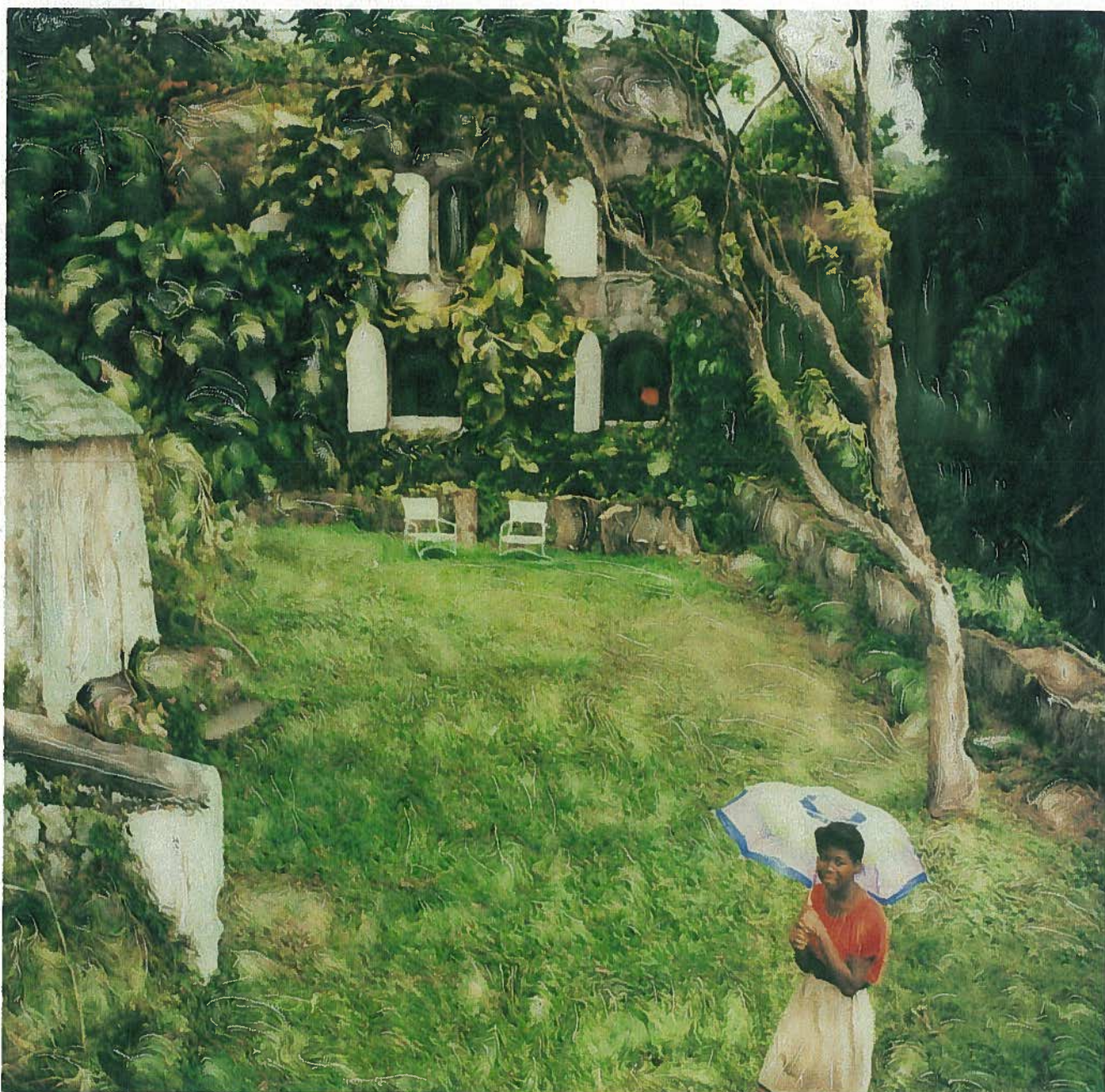
notice. I decided to get wet.

Peter, a young manager from the OTI, drove me to Monkey Beach along Frigate Bay, just east of town. Peter was working a double shift and wanted a break. His Toyota pickup bounced over the places where the Basseterre streets didn't quite connect on the level, and out of town on blacktop patches. I whined a little. "Well," he laughed, "this is mostly a place for couples, right, but singles can have a good time, too. I've seen a lot of them come in here and after a week they never want to go home."

I painted my Celtic skin with sun block and tried to relax on the lounge.

Rather than dismiss his analysis as stock propaganda, I accepted it as a long shot. I saw a bumper sticker that read, "Is Cultural Explosion Wid Mas All Over Tung." That's Caribbean English. It means "there is a cultural explosion with masquerades all over town." It referred to Carnival, at Christmas time. Peter said that's when I should have come. You can barely find a room, then, he said. The joint jumps.

We pulled up to Monkey Beach and parked. I threw my towel and No. 23 sun screen onto a plastic lounge



under a post fitted with palm fronds. It looked like a mushroom and cost \$1 to sit under, but what's money when you're on an expense account. The rest of the beach was filled with Canadian tourists from a nearby All-Inclusive Package Tour resort. I'd been there the previous evening and thought I'd died and gone to hell with Dan Aykroyd's and Steve Martin's "wild and crazy guys."

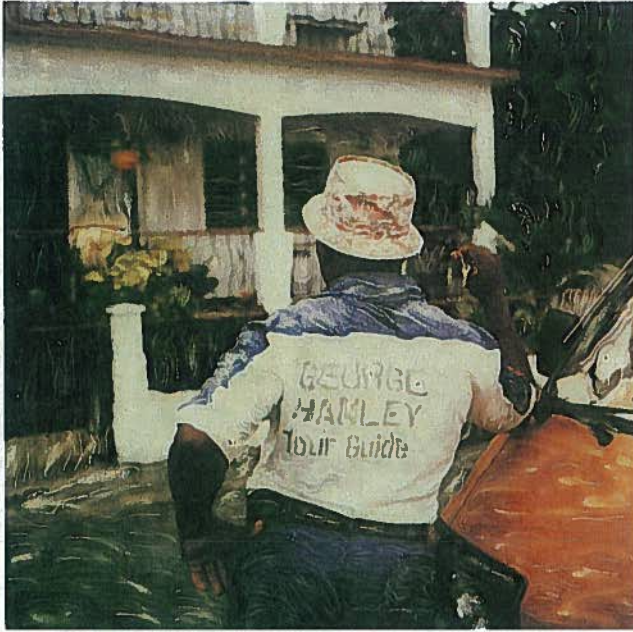
That or an English holiday/concentration camp at Brighton. But the vacationers from Toronto were having fun. Their laminated neck-tag passes entitled

*Alexander Hamilton
was born on
Nevis; so was
Cicely Tyson.*

them to use sailboats, windsurfers, and snorkeling gear from the rental hut. I painted my Celtic skin with sun block and tried to relax on the lounge with my Walkman. But I was 10 yards from the Caribbean. It was gentle and light green. It

looked like what I needed.

I swam awhile, then walked up the shoreline to where I saw a woman in a bikini wade out alone into the sea. I talked to her above the surf din. She had a British accent. No, she didn't want a beer, and that was her house behind, where she lived with her hus-



band and family. I swam back down to Monkey Beach and found a vacant stool at the cabana bar. I ordered a Carib beer and listened to "I Ain't Got You" by the Yardbirds. A Kittitian in his cups struck up a conversation. We tried to communicate, but his West Indian English, a lilting version whose inflections and colloquialisms take as much getting used to as a Scottish brogue, left us smiling and nodding heads more than making sense. That and the rum. I'm pretty sure we were talking about scuba diving and how he had speared a big fish. Either that or he himself had recently been speared.

Later I returned to the OTI. I showered and napped briefly before dinner, and when I went outside, a full moon had risen across the bay. Moonbeams shot out across the sea like the train of a wedding gown, and the entire town was illuminated. Dozens of electric lights twinkled along Bay Road, more up in the hills. I ate barbecued shrimp on the waterfront wharf and couldn't stop looking at the sky.

III

"People just don't know how to relax," Arthur Leaman said as we did just that on the veranda of his Golden Lemon hotel at Dieppe Bay, a former French settlement on the north side of the island, 40 miles and 180 degrees around from Basseterre. Paulette, a young woman whose impeccable grace and indisputably correct lemon-and-white uniform exactly symbolized the ambiance of the inn, served a lunch of cold cucumber soup, lobster salad, and homemade ice cream. Mr. Lea-

man quit his job as editor of *House and Garden* magazine 26 years ago after visiting St. Kitts on a holiday. "You know what a lemon is," he explained. "My friends all told me that's what this was."

Today, it may be the most exclusive retreat on the island (\$225 a day, minimum of four days). It's where Robert Redford stayed and has been praised by *Esquire* and other life-style kibitzers. Mr. Leaman is adding a new section this year. For a man who built a benevolent version of the Mosquito Coast, his life is a comedy of finding thermostats, towels, chandeliers, electric switches, and a hundred other items of the trade you can't just go down to the builder's supply and pick up. On St. Kitts, you can't even get fresh milk.

"I see a lot of couples here," Mr. Leaman observed. "Especially the yuppies. They both work, and this is the time they want to be together. Sometimes they ask to be served in their rooms, or they sit alone over at one end of the dining room." Paulette brought fresh tea, approaching and serving by the book. Mr. Leaman trains his staff like he decorates his rooms. "I find that after 7 to 10 days, though, people want to go home," Mr. Leaman said, smiling at friends who walked in. "That's why I think coming here is more about relaxing than escaping. People just want to take a breather."

I thought about Mr. Leaman's little corner of the world the next day at Banana Bay. I took the 10 AM boat, along with Frank and Linda, 30ish honeymooners from Falls Church, Virginia, whom I'd first met in a taxi from the airport to the OTI. The three of us would've been alone at Banana Bay (also operated by OTI) except for Steve and Debbie, also 30ish, who'd been at the small hotel four days. They hadn't left. Hadn't even gone into town.

"We never want to leave," said Steve, an Appalachian physician. I remember looking at him with what must have seemed incredulity. Stay

on this one little stretch of beach — nice enough, enclosed on three sides, a gorgeous view of Nevis across the blue water, coral reefs over which to snorkel, and absolutely not one damn thing to do if you didn't want — but not even *leave the premises*? Steve and Debbie were into the pudding. They were way in. They were serious. They didn't ever want to leave.

That's when I went running. When I got back, I had lunch — lobster again, and a couple of Caribs — and Frank said one of the hammocks back under the coconut trees along the shore had his name on it. Must have been the one next to mine. I stretched out and half-dozed. Last night I'd had a weird dream. It had

*What I cared about
most was nothing.
In my journal I wrote,
"I dread going back."*



been a while since I had remembered my dreams. Now they were behaving like shameless exhibitionists.

It just comes up on you, the pleasures of nothing. In my hammock half-awakeness, I came to a crucial realization: I didn't care. I didn't care what time it was, where my note pad was, what day it was, whether the Guatemala peace plan would be implemented, how the NFL players' strike affected the season, if I dared to eat a peach. That day I had taken to wearing silly clothes — loud multicolored jams and an absurd straw hat, because I didn't care. I thought about lovely Paulette, about coolly efficient Hazel, the OTI desk manager — OK, I did still care about women,

but what I cared about most of all was nothing. In my journal I wrote, "I'm starting to dread going back."

IV

I saw Kim the next morning, standing in the drizzle on the dock at Basseterre Bay, waiting to board the 8:30 ferry to Charlestown, the capital of Nevis. The embarkation point was congested. Police checked boarding slips, and passengers coming and going threaded through each other like opposing armies. They were on business, on pleasure, gone shopping — bags and baskets of food, clothes, gadgets. It was

(Continued on page 85)

FEAR AND LOAFING

(Continued from page 61)

like boarding the monthly steamer up the Amazon. Michael, the photographer, was not happy with picture-taking possibilities or with his digestive tract. He stretched out on one of the bench seats in the ferry's front cabin, and I sat behind Kim.

She wore a black T-shirt and jeans, had shoulder-length brown hair and die-for blue eyes, but most important, she was from Texas: Houston and Madisonville. She'd been on Nevis the past two years and was trying to establish a business making and repairing sails. In a few days, she'd find out if a key contract would come through. She'd been over to St. Kitts about the business and to see one of an incalculable number of boyfriends — single women on the islands could share a six-pack of Carib and have leftovers. Kim's essential concern upon returning to Nevis, where she lived among the locals in a modest, concrete-block bungalow with Ting, Puppy Dog, and Bitty, her dogs and semi-cat, was to find her Mini-Moke, a car that looks like a golf cart. She'd loaned it to a friend.

We put in at the dock, but the Moke wasn't around. Not pleased, she went off to find it. Michael and I fell into the clutches of a rotund, black Santa Claus of a man named George Hanley — his name printed on the front of his T-shirt. He was the dean of the Nevis guides and became our godfather for the day. Michael learned that some of the Nevisians don't like to have their photos taken. After a slightly ugly incident, George decided to get us back into good spirits with his patented, for VIPs only tour.

Like St. Kitts (also known as St. Christopher), Nevis's history is closely linked to both the United Kingdom and the United States. Alexander Hamilton was born on Nevis; so was Cicely Tyson. Admiral Nelson was married there to Frances Nisbet, of the Nevis Nisbets. The French and British conducted gang war on Nevis, too, but the English influence endured here even more palpably than on St. Kitts. The Queen came in '66 and '85. In Charlestown, women are asked not to wear swimsuits in public. If the local residents were white instead of black and there were slightly fewer coconut trees, you'd swear Nevis was a part of the Channel Islands. But it's just a volcano in the middle of the sea — it

looks like a rubber traffic cone, but in green and clouds. Not much happens on Nevis, and quickly you forget there's anywhere else in the world.

George drove around the south edge of Nevis Peak (3,232 feet). Charlestown gave way to narrow, winding roads flirting with the sides of the volcano. Gray mists, probably imported from London, cloaked the view. We stopped at the Zetland Plantation, about 1,000 feet up. Like many of the

Nevis hotels, the Zetland consists of a central manor house and outlying guest cottages scattered around an estate with tennis courts, swimming pools, and small-scale recreation. Almost every need is anticipated and provided, and meals are addictive. You face no concerns save those within yourself. Hotels here cost, on average, \$110 a day per couple.

I used the Zetland phone to call Kim. On the way back to George's van, I



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encountered the very British Marian Adams. She and her husband Nigel own the place. I told her it looked very nice, but remote. "Well," she said, "people with very hard work in stressful jobs come here to just relax. They come in and they're so tense. Seven or eight days later they leave completely different people."

George, Michael, and I met Kim for lunch at Croney's Old Manor, where Vicki Knorr runs the stone-walled estate with the help of her son, Greg, Kim's ex-boyfriend. The weather had worsened, and Michael was fraught in the way only people from Southern California can get in the presence of persistent inclemency. But I didn't care. I had decided, over lunch, to abandon Michael and spend the rest of the day with Kim. It was the obvious choice. I hopped into Kim's Moke. Then I hopped out to push-start it. The battery wasn't any good since falling out when the Moke hit a rut, a *big* rut. Then Kim and I were off, leaving Michael and George to whatever fate and Willard Scott, somewhere far away and forgotten, had bequeathed them.

She showed me the island I would never have seen, the people I would never have known. We drove around to the hotels — the Montpelier, the Nisbet, Cliffdwellers, and others — but I got tired of that and just wanted to see real life. We stopped at her house in the village of Bath so she could confer with a seamstress employee. Kim made a few calls and talked to her helper, also a friend, about work and about "boys." As a man, you can be a "good" boy or a "bad" boy, in the communal estimation of the women. Bad boys did things like borrow your Moke and not return it, or leave it on empty. Bad boys also carried on too many affairs, although by island standards that was not an uncommon activity. My impression was that on all social, racial, and national levels, long nights in small communities in paradise yielded a lively soap opera of romance — hidden, of course, from tourists.

Late in the afternoon, we went into Charlestown for a beer at the Nook, where the guys hang out. It was a very old place, built in the 17th or 18th century. In the back was a semi-refurbished courtyard through which you could see ships coming into the pier as they had done for centuries. In the front was a stand-up bar patronized by



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local workers. The wall posters were similar to those back in the Basseterre record shop, only more so. I paid for two Caribs in EC, the island currency (\$1 EC = \$2.65). Looking outside at the sea I thought of Jamestown, the former capital of Nevis, visited in 1607 by Captain John Smith en route to Jamestown, Thirteen Colonies. This Jamestown you couldn't visit, except with scuba gear. An earthquake struck in 1680, and the town sank.

It was getting late. The last flight to Basseterre was scheduled at 6 PM. We left the Nook and headed for Newcastle Airport, a strip so small it once had a stop sign on the runway. The sun had peeked out, and the evening was stunning. The plane was late. Several men were on a bench outside a refreshment hut next to the terminal and we sat with them. I drank a Carib and watched the twilight fall across St. Kitts, across the water. Only a damn fool would take that plane. Kim said a calypso/reggae band, "Burning Flame," would be playing that night, and she felt like dancing.

While I was canceling my ticket, Kim spotted Richard Lupinacci inside the terminal. He was waiting for Maureen, his wife, to return from New York. They own the Hermitage (had formerly managed the Zetland) and although the hotel wasn't quite ready for the season, he said he could put me up. We said we'd be late, and he said he'd leave a key in the door.

We drove through the night along the Nevis roads, stopping for dinner, to feed Kim's menagerie, to chat with some of her friends — she knows everyone on the island. The weather had cooled, and by the time we headed out to the Conchshell Club, I was like a zombie of joy.

The club lay along the shore. It was like going to a Texas roadhouse. Cars parked helter-skelter along a muddy trail leading into the place, and in front of the door, men hoping for a good time that evening clustered and got high on anticipation. Berkeley, the fisherman who lived near Kim, was collecting cover at the door. He had short dreadlocks, blond on the top, and arms you get when you use them for a living. Good doorman. He waved us in and I felt safe and welcome.

The club was semi-enclosed, an open-air dance floor in the middle. The

(Continued on page 90)

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FEAR AND LOAFING

(Continued from page 87)

bandstand was crowded with enormous speakers and the stuff of high-tech music — synthesizers, electric drum kits. "Burning Flame" would be a while starting up, but the place already shuddered with the sound of big-beat tapes. Kim and I drank Caribs and Tings (a grapefruit drink) and watched people trickle in. I was ready for the kind of music to keep you dancing until sunrise but the band was a disappointment. Too loud and too much synthesizer. I wanted roots reggae and here was a creature from MTV. We left before the second set. The drive up to the Hermitage cleared me out again. We passed a field with strange religious talismans — stone carvings, tin crosses, end-of-world placards. I knew there was something about this island. It was infinitely seductive. Souls washed up here with each tide.

I awoke in the Hermitage having forgotten where I was. We'd had to roust Richard from bed because he forgot to leave the key in the door and then we'd all said goodnight and gone our separate ways and I was in stage IV REM when my head hit the pillow. The room was like a Cotswold country inn and in the morning I had to remind myself I was in the Caribbean. I had to remind myself I was awake.

I had no change of clothes, but didn't care. The day passed faster than I could hold it. I thought about taking the ferry back, but didn't, and half-tried to hire a boat, but didn't, and then it was 6 PM and airplane time again. I returned to St. Kitts. I found Michael at dinner in the OTI. I thought I was in a swoon, but he was almost incoherent, babbling about "the most stunning woman in the history of mankind," a woman from Trinidad who'd just checked in. With her fiancé. Michael wasn't overstating it; she made Shakira Caine look like Mrs. Olsen.

So it was really true. These things happened to you. The moon was no longer full, but still bright, and a street band was playing over in Basseterre. We walked up to hear it. I kept thinking of the Conchshell Club. I was supposed to return to the Real World in the morning. I wasn't going to. I would just miss my flight. I wanted to go home to Nevis.

So I did. Chartered a plane the next morning. Got out at the airport, left my gear with Michael, who had also wanted to return. I had too much en-

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ergy, crazy with exultation. It was about two miles down to the Oualie Beach Club, an expatriate beach-side hangout Kim had taken me to yesterday, so I hit the pavement. I ran past houses, villas, hotels, unable to stop. It was even hotter than the route to Banana Bay, but I didn't care. When I got to Oualie Beach, I didn't stop. Eventually I tired, then turned back and trotted in past the club veranda to the sea, pausing only to remove my Nikes and socks. I don't believe the local Brits having Sunday lunch were accustomed to seeing an American jog in, disrobe, and take to the surf, but on the other hand, I didn't care. The sea almost kept me. Afterwards, I rested under a shade tree and drank as much Ting and water as I could talk the bartender out of — I didn't have any money. Eventually, Michael showed up and also hit the water. I called Kim.

We had lunch and then Michael went up to Nisbet Beach looking for photos. He would find some great ones, but I had already found what I needed. Oualie Beach wasn't going anywhere, and neither was I. It had taken me a week to see that where I really needed to be was nowhere at all. I knew exactly how Steve and Debbie felt.

I had surrendered. Routed at Banana Bay, I was now in full retreat. My demons, those given me by the Real World, were being decimated. I had been freed. For a long time I had forgotten what a human is: a part of nature, for whom life is a constant dance of collusion with that all around. I had forgotten that dreams are the energy of life, and that the dictatorship of the rational is insatiable: It will kill you. For three days on Nevis, I had been unable to identify my state of mind. It was because I had no need to. I was not apart from it, objectifying it; I was absorbed within it. Dreams were consciousness. I was not alienated from myself.

I walked with Kim into the clear waters off Oualie Beach. I listened as she told me of her life: working as a sound engineer on *Evita* in Chicago, crewing on boats that plied the islands, of her divorce, of making a new life here. She was shoulder-deep, her aqua swimsuit nearly the color of her eyes in the late-day pastel sun. I still have that painting in my head. I didn't dream it.

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