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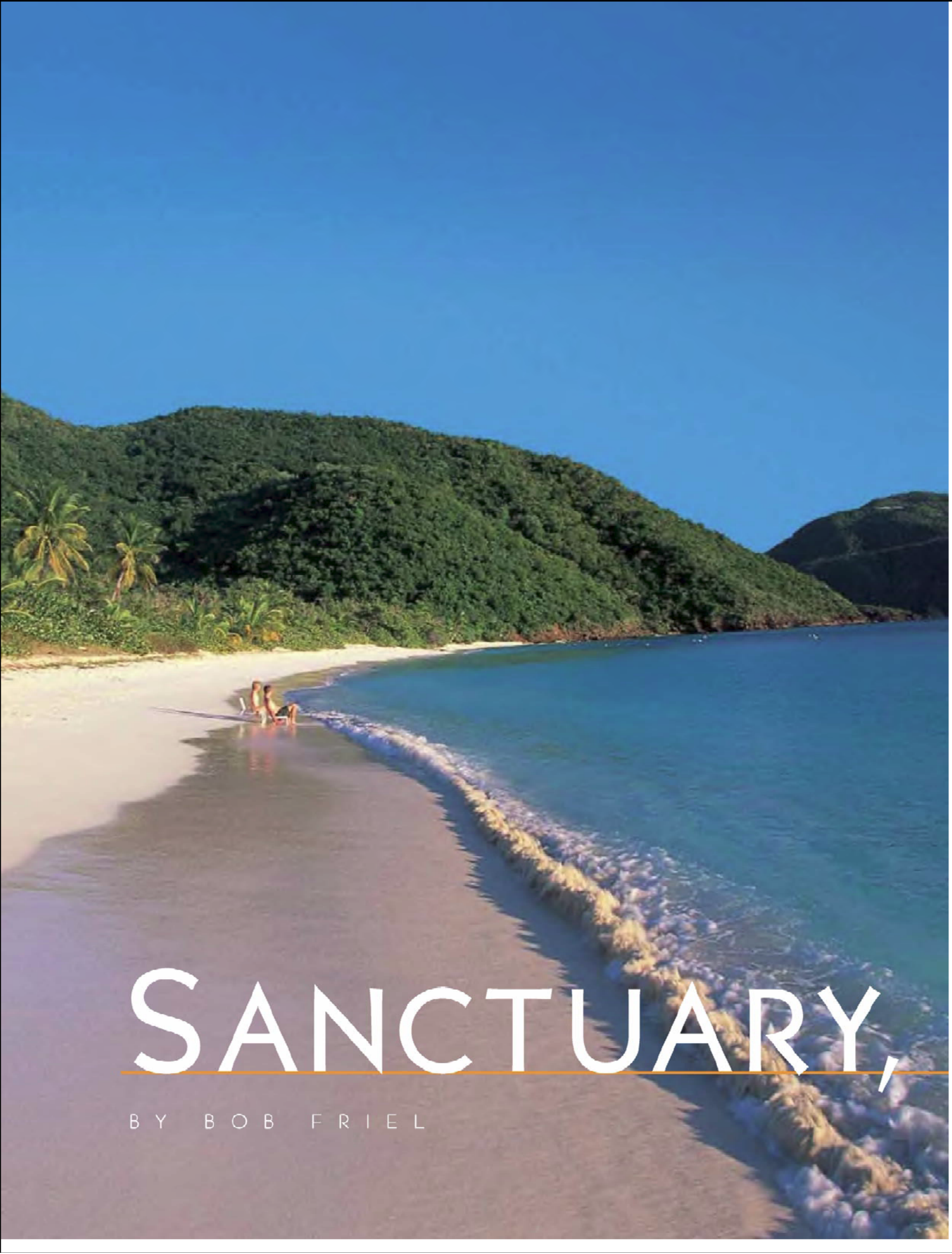
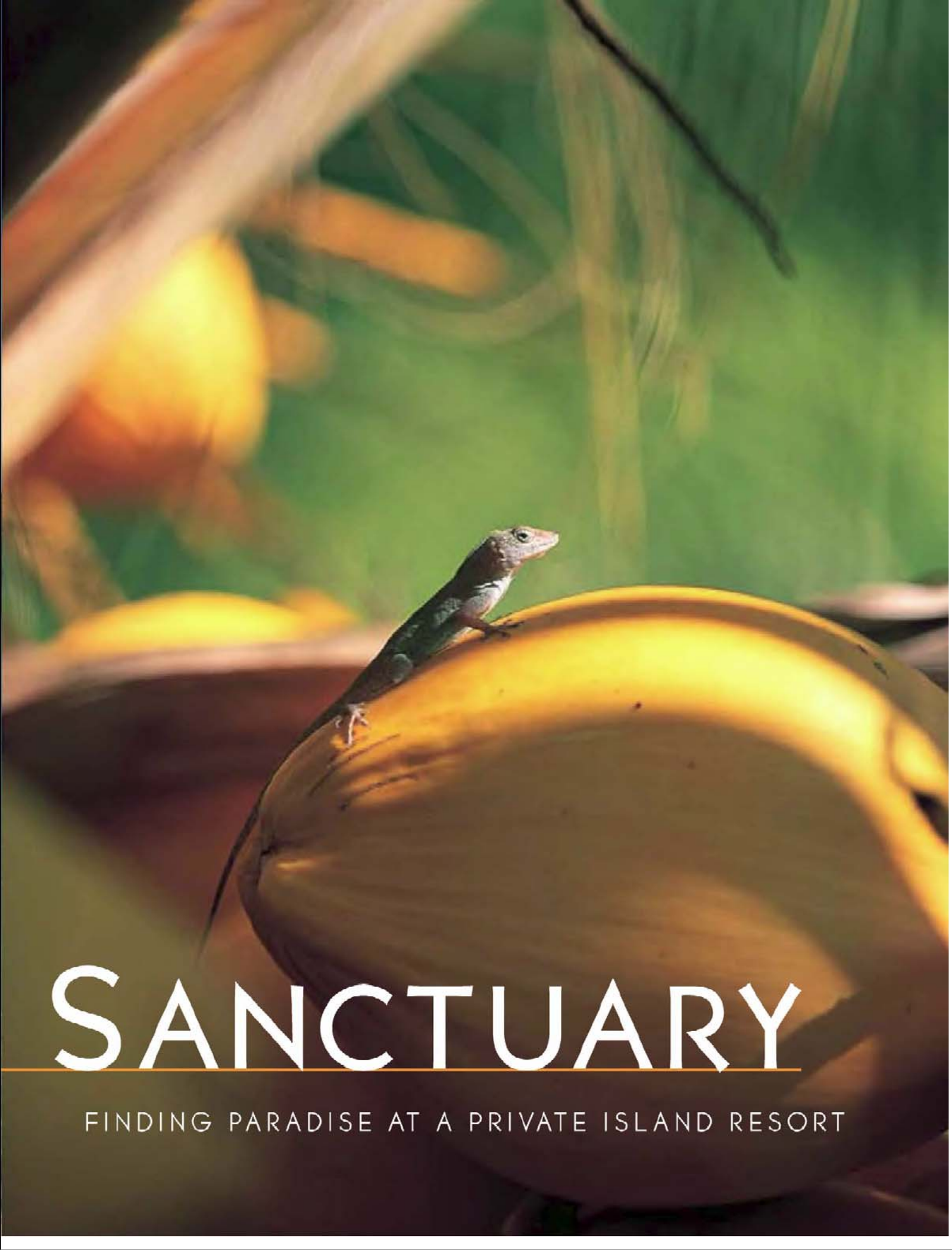


SANCTUARY,

BY BOB FRIEL



SANCTUARY

FINDING PARADISE AT A PRIVATE ISLAND RESORT

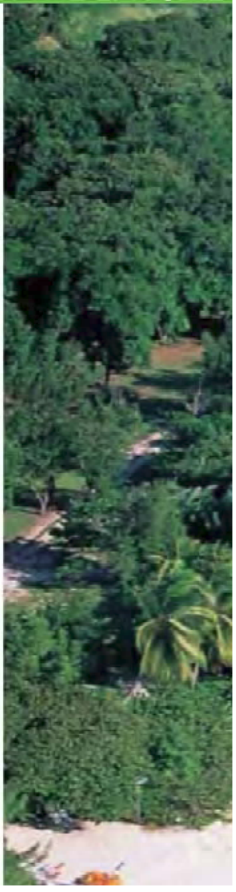
Looking up and down the long swath of sugar-fine sand fronting Guana Island's White Bay, I can't see a single other person. But I'm hardly alone. Swarming the entire length of the shore is a vast shoal of silvery six-inch Caribbean herring. I float amid a million or so of these perky little fish, which form a shimmering, wriggling wall all around me.

It's been the same total immersion in the natural world everywhere I turn on Guana. Green-throated caribs — hummingbirds draped in iridescent feathers — probe blossoms a few feet from my breakfast table; exotic birds, lizards and blooms make every stroll to my cottage a Discovery Channel special; and Antillean piping frogs serenade me to sleep each night with their thousand-part whistling harmony. But the wildlife display reaches its zenith here on White Bay.

Below me lies a protected coral reef populated by all manner of colorful creatures. A flotilla of pelicans bobs beside me, flights of brown boobies circle above, and the shallows are a thick soup of these herring that have apparently decided that this calm, idyllic body of water lapping against one of the British Virgin Islands' finest beaches is *the* place to be this season.

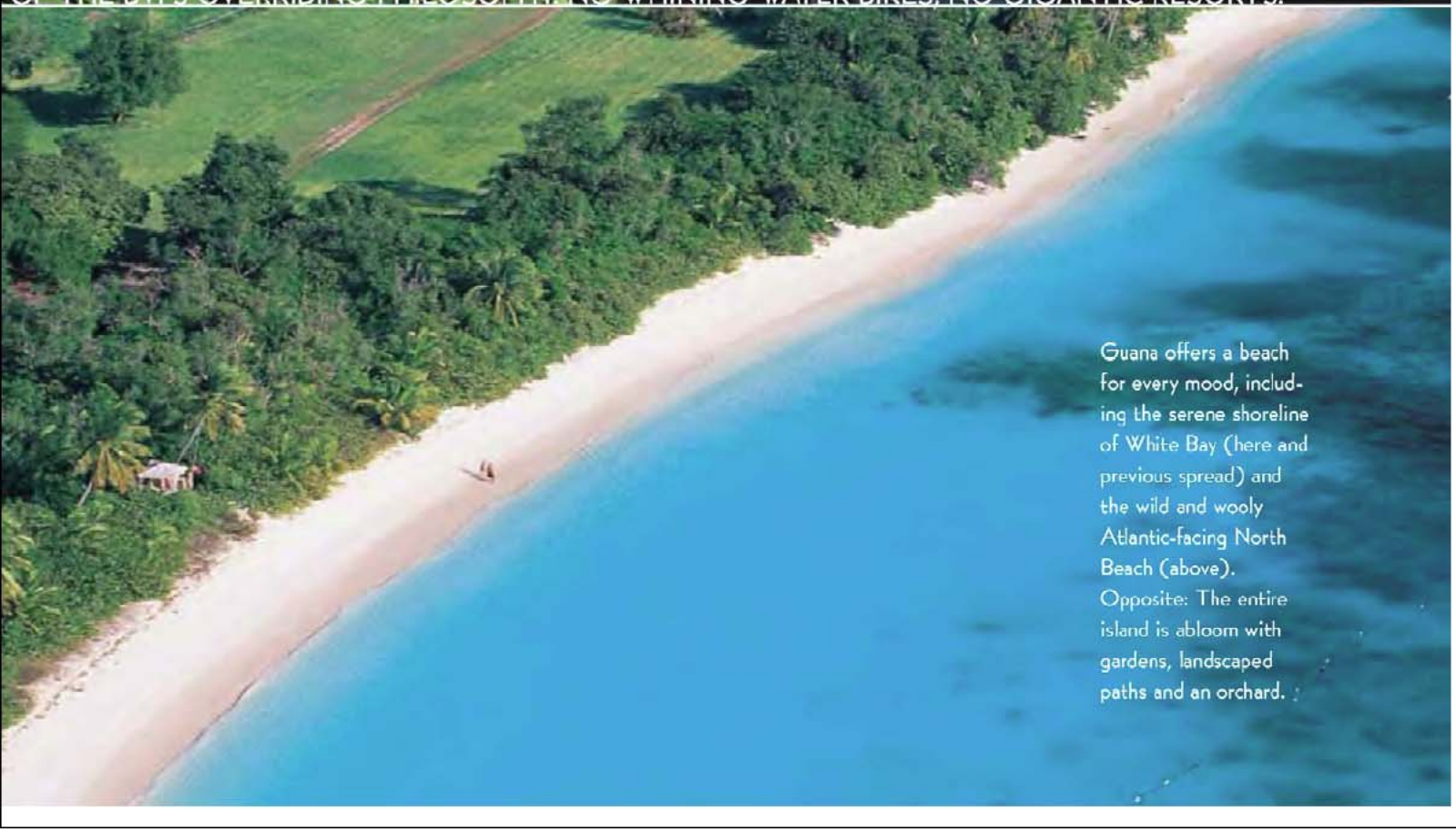
THE OWNERS' ENVIRONMENTAL ETHOS HAS MADE GUANA THE EPITOME

From my spot in the school, I can see above the beach and its bulwark of sea grapes, beyond the massage pavilion serenely nestled in the foliage, and I can track the path of a dizzying switchback road that leads up to a smattering of buildings slung along the ridge between two towering green hills. The largest structure, glowing Greek-Isle white in the afternoon sun, is the vacation home of Henry and Gloria Jarecki, who've owned the island since 1975 and whose environmental ethos has made Guana the epitome of the BVI's philosophy: no whining water bikes, no sinking our islands beneath gigantic resorts. The Jareckis established their enviro bona fides when they declared the entire island a nature reserve and began turning it over to researchers for two months each year. As a result, Guana boasts one of the most extensively catalogued ecosystems in the Caribbean.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: BOB FRIEL; ZACH STOWALL; BOB FRIEL; ZACH STOWALL. PREVIOUS SPREAD: BOB FRIEL (2)

OF THE BVI'S OVERRIDING PHILOSOPHY: NO WHINING WATER BIKES, NO GIGANTIC RESORTS.



Guana offers a beach for every mood, including the serene shoreline of White Bay (here and previous spread) and the wild and wooly Atlantic-facing North Beach (above). Opposite: The entire island is abloom with gardens, landscaped paths and an orchard.

WITH 850 UNDULATING ACRES, 20 HIKING TRAILS AND SEVEN BEACHES, THOSE

The rest of the buildings, including a clubhouse built on the fieldstone bones of an 18th-century Quaker estate, make up the private-island resort. Up to 32 guests at a time enjoy Guana, though with 850 undulating acres, 20 hiking trails and seven beaches, those staying here find it easy to pretend they have the island all to themselves.

A number of guests are planning to meet for sundowners at the beach bar set beneath a spreading casuarina just up the bay. An icy rum-and-something would soothe the salty aftertaste I have from snorkeling, but the sun has a ways to go before dipping behind Tortola and I decide to linger in the water awhile longer.

I'm still cooling down from an afternoon hike that started at North Beach, Guana's windward-facing bay bordered by imposing cliffs of volcanic stone that fall abruptly into rocky shallows. It's a prime setting for the resort's most secluded accommodation, a beach cottage much coveted by escape artists and honeymooners. Trekking cross-island, I'd dallied in the impressive Eden created by the unstoppable Dr. Liao, a Chinese ornithologist/naturalist/gardener who, at 70-something years old, has been tending the island's wildlife and trails for more than 20 years. His orchard supplies the resort with a cornucopia of fruits, including papaya, breadfruit, coconuts and the sweet miniature bananas that are the secret ingredients in creamy piña coladas. The orchard is so prolific that Guana often finds itself giving away boatloads of fresh produce. "During this past summer, we were hauling out 500 pounds of fruit each week," says Roger Miller, who, along with his wife, Bridget McArthur, manages the island. "We had mangoes coming out of our ears."

Behind the orchard, past the field where a couple of retired donkeys spend their days lolling in the shade, I'd unsuccessfully attempted to call Guana's handful of roseate flamingos to the near side of their salt pond where, a few years ago, Roger unearthed the ruins of a sugar mill. Finally, a short stroll across the island's grassy lowland — reminiscent of the African veldt — had brought me here to White Bay's soft sands and sublime snorkeling.

I hear a faint buzzing in the water and look up to see one of the resort's boats idling back to the dock. A young couple from Baltimore hops out. Their idea of sanctuary, they declared last night at the bar, is a vacation without the kids — and they've been taking full advantage of Guana's romantic possibilities. Today, the staff dropped them at a deserted beach on nearby Little Camanoe Island for a castaway picnic. Another East Coast couple waves to me from the sand. They're on the return leg of an ambitious hike that took them over the top of 800-foot-high Sugarloaf Mountain, past the bat caves gouged into ancient volcanic ash and down to a secluded beach where they had arranged for lunch to be delivered by boat. I wave back and watch them walk to the bar and greet yet another pair of Americans, rare-book dealers who live in London. Yesterday, getting to know them over a buffet lunch of salads and grilled fresh fish, I realized that this reserved expat couple typify the ideal Guana type: well-off, well-traveled middle-agers seeking a quiet, classic, glitz-free, naturally beautiful island retreat.

When I first arrived it struck me as odd how cozily everyone was getting along. I'd assumed

STAYING HERE FIND IT EASY TO PRETEND THEY HAVE THE ISLAND TO THEMSELVES.

From left: The resort's main house dates back to the original Quaker estate; view over White Bay; castaway picnickers. Opposite: A green-throated Carib noses a Barbados pride.

BOTH PAGES, FROM LEFT: BOB FRIEL; ZACH STOWALL (2); BOB FRIEL

Pelicans head for their roosts on Guana's cliffs. Exotics (below) populate the island's Garden of Eden meditation area. Opposite: Sunset views from Eleuthera Cottage (top) and over White Bay.

that anyone who booked a private island resort was looking for a total Greta Garbo experience and would "vant to be alone."

"Our guests know what the island is all about before they arrive," says Bridget. "So we get people with similar interests and sensibilities who find an instant rapport with others staying here." With no lavish amenities, nightlife, room service, air conditioning, satellite TV or even in-room phones, Guana does not attract irrepressible Type-A personalities, luxury hounds or partiers. Instead, it engenders a clubby atmosphere where guests scatter during the day — adding birds to their life lists, trekking the cactus- and orchid-dotted trails, playing tennis or croquet, lounging on the beach with a good book — then gather together in the main house's living room for cocktails, hors d'oeuvres and shared tales of the day's adventures.

The resort further stimulates mingling with communal dining. Couples are free to request a private nook, but if they don't, Roger and Bridget add them to a rotating seating chart that enables everyone to get acquainted at candlelit tables over the chefs' excellent and varied fare. Often, the guests form lasting bonds. "We have many who return each year with people they originally met here and found to have the same hobbies or passions," says Bridget. "We have our hiking group, our fishing group, our private-pilot group, even one group that all share the same birthdays." About five times a year, a single group, be it a reunion of family or friends or a business meeting, will rent out the entire island just for themselves.

On a typical Guana evening, dinner is followed by another drink or two at the honor bar, and then the guests pair off again, saying their goodnights and using their little Guana Island welcome-pack flashlights to navigate along fragrant, flower-lined paths back to one of 16 comfortable cottages. There, they'll relax on the porch, enjoy the breeze, watch the moon and stars over the ocean, listen to the frogs and then drift off beneath the spinning ceiling fan, snug in their private refuge.

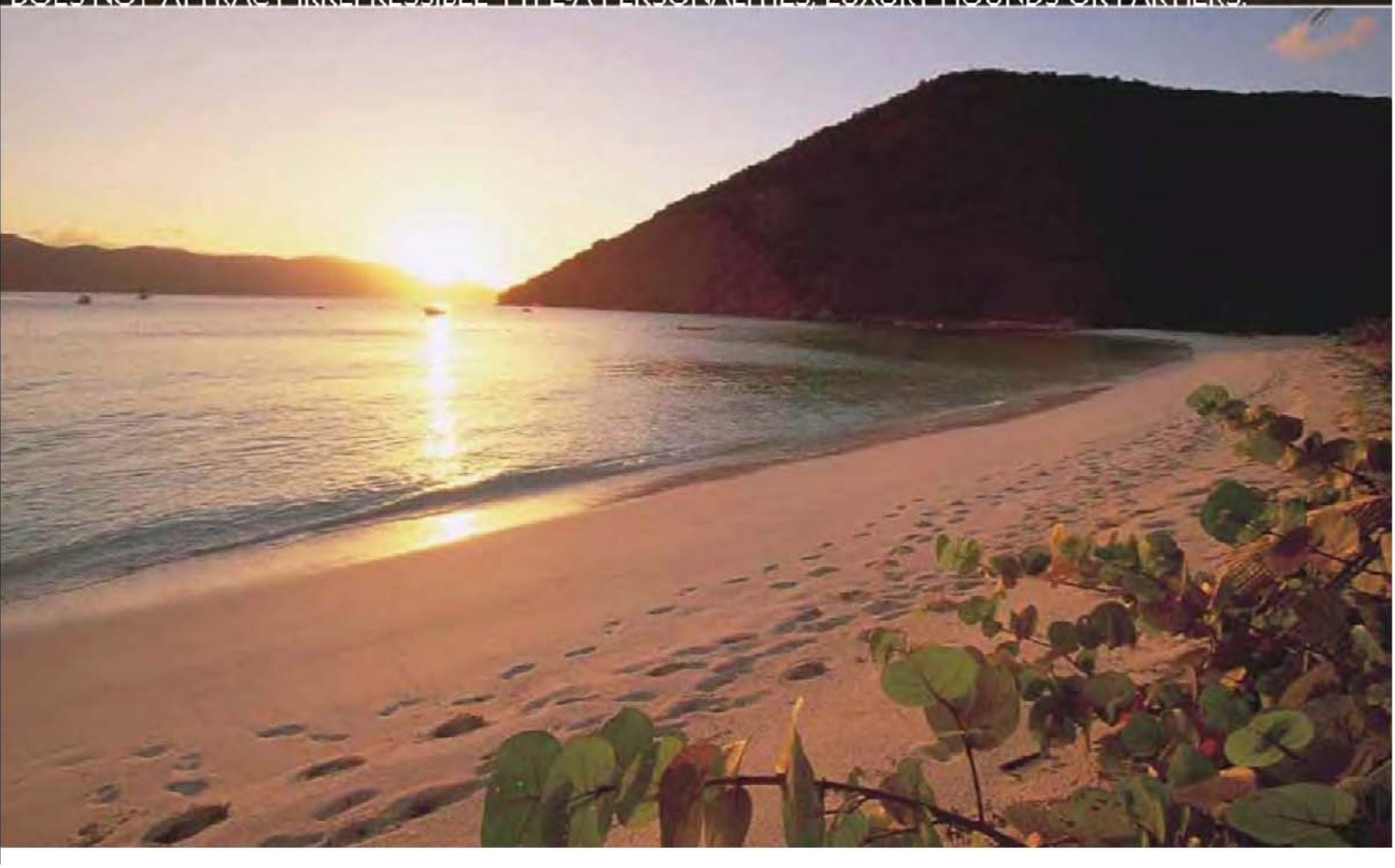
As the sun sinks lower and the sky begins to blush, I take another look underwater at my schoolmates. Suddenly the herring shoot off in all directions, flashing bursts of silver like exploding fireworks as a pack of five-foot-long tarpon with low-slung mouths and mirrored scales slice through them. There's also an attack from above, as pelicans awkwardly flap into the air like overweight seaplanes, circle to gain height, then fling out their huge wings and crash-dive face-first into the school. Several birds come down so close that I get to see them suspended underwater, all splayed feathers and bulging beaks, before they pop to the surface to gulp down their prey. It's an exuberant demonstration of a healthy, undisturbed food chain.

WITH NO LAVISH AMENITIES, NIGHTLIFE, ROOM SERVICE OR EVEN IN-ROOM PHONES, GUANA

Down the beach, the other guests walk barefoot to the edge of the water with drinks in hand to toast the sunset silhouetting the moored boats and soaring birds. As I swim back to shore to join them, I realize that we usually use the word "sanctuary" to talk about protecting wildlife. Here, a lucky few have found a place that also provides a safe haven for people.

Bob Friel is Caribbean Travel & Life's *editor in chief.*

Guana Island's double-occupancy rates ($695 per night low season, $895 high) provide a couple with all meals, snacks and afternoon tea. First-timers will be pleasantly surprised when their dinner waitress returns to the table with platters offering second helpings. Rates also cover transfers from Tortola's Beef Island Airport and all on-island activities. Extra charges apply for alcoholic drinks, massages, guides and motorized water sports. North Beach Cottage rents for $1,390 in low season ($1,890 high). Have the island all to yourself from $12,500 per day. Contact: 800-544-8262; guana.com

BOTH PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ZACH STOVALL (6); BOB FRIEL

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