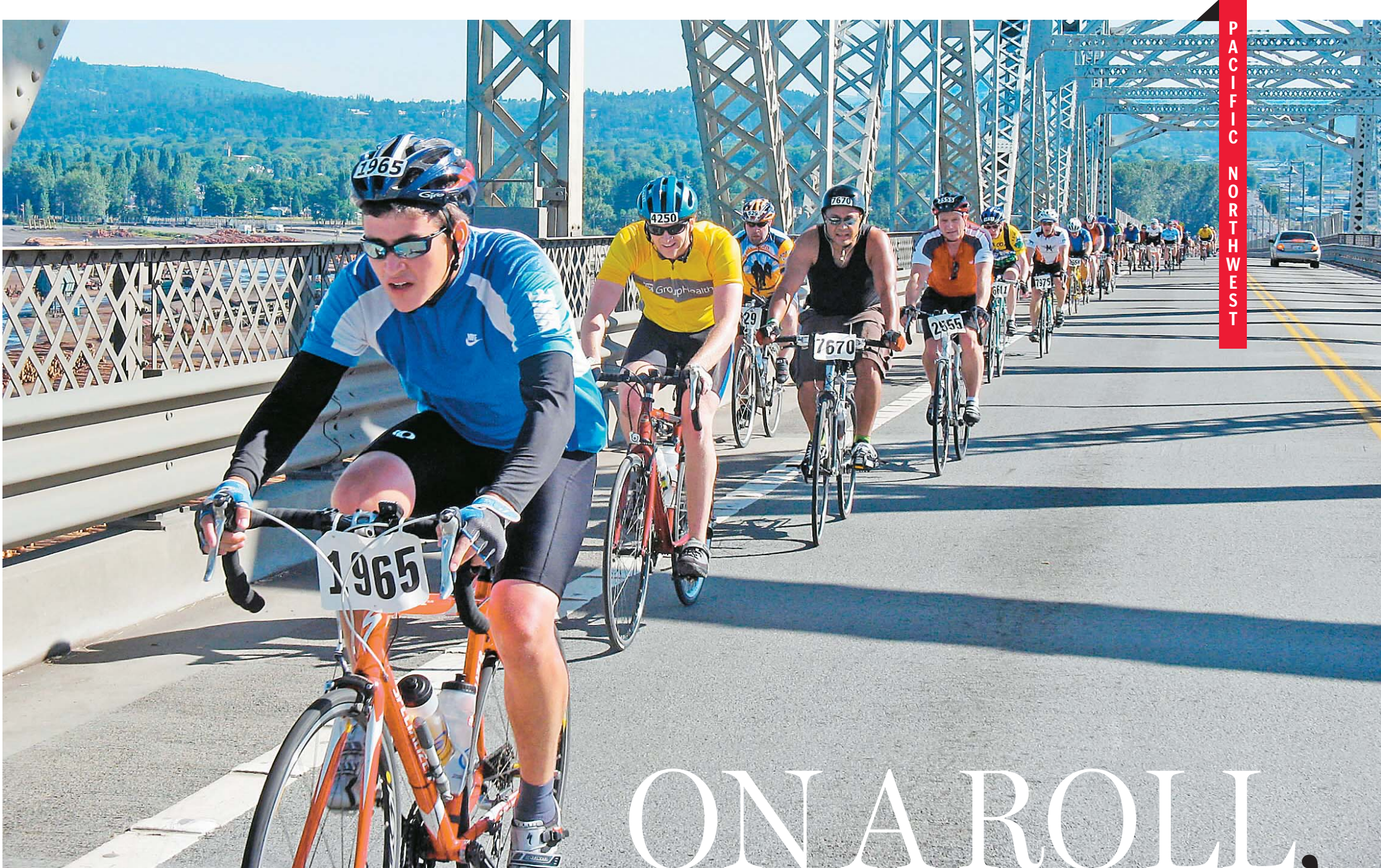




ON A ROLL, YEAR-ROUND

Pedaling for fun or fitness, hills or no hills, to win or see the sights is what they like to do

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

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EATTLE — As the rising sun set Mount Rainier ablaze one Saturday last July, a man with bronzed, muscular legs pedaled past me, his red dress fluttering in the breeze. Three women followed, one with a rubber ducky tied to her bike helmet, the other two in colorful T-shirts that said, “My sister made me do this!”

Not all the riders were in drag or decorative wear, but everyone was joined in the spirit of fun and camaraderie for one of the country’s largest recreational bike rides, the Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic, STP for short. The 202-mile event, which celebrates its 30th anniversary on July 11-12, draws participants from as far away as Japan, Australia, and Serbia. Some of them pedal standard hybrids, old-time cruisers, even unicycles. Others zigzag down the road on oversized skateboards. And many glide along on souped-up carbon-fiber frames worth more than the combined cost

of my first three cars.

The participants, who numbered about 9,500 last year, are as diverse as their wheels and come in all shapes, sizes, athletic abilities, and ages. Typically more than half are first-time STP riders.

“You’ll see people who’ve never ridden a bike 50 miles and now they’re riding 200 miles; it’s very empowering,” said Jerry Baker, 67, who has ridden the STP every year since it started in 1979. Baker won the event that year, the only time it was staged as a race. (It wasn’t held in 1980 because of Mount St. Helens’ catastrophic eruption that May.) “For me, it’s a big social event now. I meet people I haven’t seen in a year and I like seeing the scenery along the way.”

The mostly level route — there’s only one daunting hill with a 335-foot climb — takes riders out of Seattle at dawn along sleepy

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KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

On the Seattle to Portland ride, cyclists cross the Lewis and Clark Bridge over the Columbia River, from Washington into Rainier, Ore.

CARIBBEAN

Legendary beauties swimming in a sea of myths

BY PATRICIA BORNES | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

With sojourners blogging about the Caribbean since Columbus, is there anything about this perennial warm-weather destination we don’t know?



PATRICIA BORNES FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

MYTH: The best time to visit is winter.

REALITY: The best time to escape New England is winter, but the Caribbean is appealing practically year-round. Its thermometer from winter to summer

fluctuates between 75 and 87 degrees, and the trade winds (a.k.a. the Caribbean air conditioner) do their magic except from about August to mid-fall. December to March is the Caribbean’s dry season when the islands are their most pricey, crowded, and brown. In May, the start of rainy season when rates drop like an elevator express, the landscape is a Fauve palette of frangipani and royal poinciana, the beaches are flat out empty, and a rain shower typically lasting minutes is unlikely to ruin your day. Hurricane season, although technically June to November, is most concerning

from August to mid-October, September being prime time. Then, choose islands outside the usual storm path, like Barbados, Aruba, Curaçao, and Turks and Caicos, and look for resorts and booking companies that offer trip cancellation insurance.

MYTH: If you’ve taken southern, eastern, and western Caribbean cruises, that about covers it.

REALITY: The Caribbean Sea touches more than 25 countries



PATRICIA BORNES



MIKE TOY

and 7,000-plus islands and cays. Cruise ships cover less than 1 percent of the region.

MYTH: It’s only for beach bums.

REALITY: The Caribbean is full of health nuts and athletes. Wind drives the board sports action in and around Puerto Rico’s Rincón, on Panama’s Bocas Del Toro islands, on the east

and south coasts of Barbados, and on the kite beaches of the Dominican Republic’s Cabarete and Guadeloupe’s Le Moule.

Flex your endurance roping down Martinique’s rain-forested, river-gorged mountainsides. Join a Sunday workout with Hike Barbados or Puerto Rico’s Panoramic Hike, a 165-mile east-west route covered over consecutive Sundays in February and March. Dominica is bush-whacking the Waitukubuli National Trail, linking waterfalls, lakes, Carib tracks, maroon hideouts, and interior villages in a 114-mile cross-island network. St. Lucia’s Forest and Lands Department and local guides make anything possible, even scaling Mount Gimie, the island’s highest peak.

MYTH: There’s no mental stimulation.

REALITY: There are vibrant intelligentsia throughout the Caribbean; the image of partying parrotheads was cultivated for the tourist trade. As countries reinvest in their histories and cultures, fresh entertainments are everywhere. A sampling from tiny Tobago: the Itsy Bitsy Folk Theatre of tambourine music,

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PATRICIA BORNES

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Northwest lures cyclists with all sorts of rides

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streets that skirt Lake Washington and cut through upscale neighborhoods. Over the next two days, bikers ride through lush farmland, shaded forests, residential neighborhoods, small towns, and past some of the region's awe-inspiring mountains.

"I always get a thrill out of seeing Mount Rainier in the beginning of the ride and views of Mount Hood coming into Portland," said Cynthia Snow, 64, of Brookline, who did her third STP ride in 2008. "Those are the high points of the trip, literally and figuratively." It's also possible to see majestic Mount St. Helens.

What draws so many people, besides the scenery, are the topography (the highest point is just 463 feet above sea level) and the outstanding support crew that helps get nearly 10,000 riders safely from Seattle to Portland in often-steamy temperatures. More than 1,000 volunteers work the event, including medics, bike mechanics, motorcyclists with the Gold Wing Touring Association who monitor the route for cyclists in need of assistance, and hundreds of other people at rest stops along the way.

"My husband blew a tire, not just a tube, on the second day," said Teresa Swango, 33, of Somerville, who did last year's ride with her husband, Todd, 31. "There was a group of four or five guys in red jerseys right behind us [a roving medical support team]. They pulled over and one of the guys had a spare tire that he gave us. They were like a pit crew. They changed and fixed everything in just a couple of minutes and said, 'There you go.'"

Volunteers at rest stops, which are spaced 10 to 20 miles apart, also provide mechanical support gratis, hand out free food, answer questions, and offer medical assistance. Many civic organizations pitch in, too, from Boy Scout troops to church groups, and senior centers host pancake breakfasts and spaghetti dinners for calorie-craving riders.

Just over one-quarter of the



Bikers celebrate completing the 202-mile Seattle to Portland ride. Participants in the 24½-mile Mount Baker Hill Climb are surrounded by the North Cascades, including Mount Shuksan.

participants complete the ride in one day, while the rest take two. Overnight riders, who must arrange their own accommodations, stay in hotels or motels, or at campsites. Locals open their doors to riders on a prearranged basis for private residence homestays, or cyclists can bring their own mattresses or camping gear and stay on school or church grounds. The Seattle-based Cascade Bicycle Club, which organizes the STP, arranges for U-Hauls to carry riders' luggage to their chosen midpoint stops.

"We've always stayed overnight with families and that's a great way to go," said Snow. "We've been really well fed and had a good place to stay, and that makes it easier to get on the road the next day."

At Centralia College, in Centralia, Wash., the official halfway point and most popular stopover place, riders can stay in the gym or camp outside. Centralia has hot showers, live music, and a beer garden, not to mention free ice cream for everyone staying or passing through.



The ride ends at Holladay Park in Portland, where there's a Finish Line Festival with food, another beer garden, more live music, much-needed massages, and exhibitors promoting other Northwest rides.

"I do think the weather here is more conducive to biking year-round," said Chuck Ayers, originally from Pomfret, Conn., who serves as executive director for the Cascade Bicycle Club.

Hundreds of fully supported one- to multiday road bike events take place in Washington and Oregon throughout the year. The

season rolls into action in February with Portland's Worst Day of the Year Ride and Seattle's Chilly Hilly, when more than 4,000 riders gather on Bainbridge Island, across Puget Sound, for a 33-undulating-mile ride.

Summer favorites include the Ride Around Mount Rainier in One Day, or RAMROD, when bikers circumnavigate one of Washington's most recognizable landmarks on a 154-mile roller-coaster route, and the Mount Baker Hill Climb, which is similar to the Mount Washington Hill Climb but three times longer.

If you go . . .

Tulip Pedal (360-428-3236, www.skagititems.com) April 4. A 20-, 40-, or 60-mile route through the tulip fields of Skagit County, one hour north of Seattle; \$25.

Daffodil Classic (253-815-9061, www.twbc.org) April 19. Offers 40-, 60-, or 100-mile loops through forests and farmland in the shadow of Mount Rainier; about 2,000 riders; \$16.

Flying Wheels Summer Century (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) June 13. The largest century ride in the state; scenic loops of 24, 45, 70, and 100 miles; \$30.

Cycle Oregon (800-292-5367, www.cycleoregon.com) July 17-19. Routes from 17 to 65 miles; begins at Western Oregon University in Monmouth and cuts across open prairie, rivers, and rolling hills; 1,600 participants; \$150.

Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) July 11-12. Taking 10,000 participants this year; \$95.

Ride Around Mount Rainier in One Day (RAMROD) (206-781-3903, www.redmondyclingclub.org) July 30. Eight-hundred bikers climb 10,000 vertical feet in 154 miles; \$80 (register until March 31).

Courage Classic (253-403-4374, www.courageclassic.org) Aug. 1-3. A 172-mile ride over three mountain passes in the Cascades; 575 riders; \$60 to register, plus \$500 in pledges.

Ride Around Washington (RAW) (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) Aug. 2-8. A 412-mile ride around the North Cascades; 215 participants; \$870.

Ride from Seattle to Vancouver and Party (RSVP) (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) Aug. 14-15. Follows 183 miles of picturesque back roads to British Columbia; 1,300 participants; \$90.

Ride 542, Mount Baker Hill Climb (360-303-1717, www.norkarecreation.com, ride542.com) Sept. 13. About 1,000 riders climb 4,300 feet in 24½ miles from Glacier to Artist Point bordering North Cascades National Park; \$35-\$60.

Chilly Hilly (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) late February. A 33-mile route around Bainbridge Island off Seattle with 2,675 feet of climbing; draws 4,000 riders; \$27.

Worst Day of the Year Ride (503-287-8786, www.comunitycyclingcenter.org) February. An 18- to 40-mile route around Portland with hot food and cider stops; \$30.

Riders test their legs and lungs while climbing nearly 4,300 feet in 24½ miles on their way to Artist Point, about an hour west of Bellingham, which offers 360-degree views of North Cascades National Park and the surrounding mountains.

You can schedule a trip here around a bike event and then spend the rest of your vacation exploring the area on foot, by car, or by bike. The Cascade Bicycle

Club also organizes 1,300 daily rides a year in Greater Seattle, all of them free, and welcomes non-members to take part. Whether you are interested in exploring the Northwest on two wheels or looking for a way to recycle an old red dress, you can find a ride that suits you.

Kari Bodnarchuk can be reached at travelwriter@karib.us.

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Fishing for the island realities

► **CARIBBEAN**
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jig, folk dance, and reel; Luise Kimme's castle studio of life-size sculptures; and Friday night "Conversations in de Yard," where local bands and artists gather in an informal salon in Alice Yard, the backyard space of architect Sean Leonard's house in Port of Spain.

MYTH: The food is one-dimensional — how many ways can you make rice and beans?

REALITY: The answer: in as many ways as there have been waves of Indian, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, Chinese, Arawak, Taino, and African migration. While almost anything you care to eat is available (even corned beef), ethnic preparations of local ingredients are the foods of place. Try pelau, a French-inspired stew of chicken or beef with rice, pigeon peas, pumpkin, brown sugar, onions, and garlic; African callaloo, a spinach soup; Amerindian pepperpot, a meat stew spiced with cinnamon, hot pepper, and cassareep; and local beach treats like Trinidad's Bake 'n' Shark, a johnny-cake filled with deep-fried shark meat dressed with tamarind or chadon bene chutney.

MYTH: Entertainment is mostly reggae and rap.

REALITY: Those have their roots in Jamaica, but pan, calypso, salsa, soca, merengue, zouk, and beguine are Caribbean, too. Walk through Trinidad's Port of Spain in the weeks leading up to Carnival and hear pan yards reverberate with practicing percussionists. Attend a jazz festival in the Dominican Republic, Barbados, St. Lucia, Puerto Rico, or Panama and catch artists like Chucho Valdés, whom you might otherwise miss. Outside the main events, there's usually a restaurant or bar — the jazz brunch in Barbados at Lobster Alive, the barbecue and steel band at Antigua's Shirley Heights — playing something to your taste.

MYTH: There's nothing to drink besides rum.

REALITY: How about Curaçao? The liqueur takes its name from the country where 15th-century Spaniards sowed Valencia oranges whose trees did poorly in the island's soil. Left to run amok, the wild Laraha rind was later found to produce a pleasing liqueur. The Senior family distillery in the Chobolobo Mansion produces Blue Curaçao, the only brand made from local oranges, and welcomes visitors.

But don't dismiss rum until you've tried rum agricole. It's not the same drink. Unlike the elixir of ubiquitous Caribbean cocktails distilled from the molasses byproduct of sugar-making, this is a sipping rum distilled from raw sugar cane juice. Martini-que's La Mauny, JM, and Neisson labels are the ones to try.

MYTH: It's crowded.

REALITY: The leeward beaches are crowded. In most cases, the body count drops on an island's windward coast, its interior, or its northernmost points. Fall asleep to tree frogs and crashing waves in a rain forest perch like Dominica's Beau Rive. For whole islands of quiet, rent a Loblolly Bay cottage and snorkel Horseshoe Reef on Anegada in the British Virgin Islands, population 200. Feel like one of the family on 5-square-mile Saba where there are no beaches, just spectacular cliff faces and reef diving. Still too crowded? Make the six-hour boat pas-



PATRICIA BORNS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The interior of Barbados and other Caribbean islands is awash in beauty, invites exploring, and is away from the congestion on beaches.

► **TRUE BLUE**
Can you picture yourself in the Caribbean? Try on the photo gallery at boston.com/travel.

sage to Puerto Rico's Mona Island and pitch your tent in a Galapagos-like setting of utter desertion.

MYTH: It isn't chic.

REALITY: Maybe you belong at Cap Juluca on Anguilla with Beyoncé and Brad Pitt, at Goldeneye on Jamaica with Sting and Johnny Depp, on the golf course with Tiger Woods at Sandy Lane on Barbados, anchored in St. Bart's Gustavia Harbor with Denzel Washington, or shoreside at Chez Maya with Jimmy Buffett.

MYTH: It's expensive.

REALITY: December to February airfares are expensive. Otherwise, the Caribbean has always had a second, more affordable economy for locals and budget travelers.

Buses and minivans substitute for car rentals on many islands, offering a great cultural experience for those who don't mind close quarters and a little heat. Dominica leads the way in under \$100-a-night stays, as do surfer accommodations with kitchen facilities to defray restaurant and bar costs. Rents are falling at self-catering cottages everywhere, and camping is an option at St. John's Maho and Cinnamon bays, White Bay Campground on Jost Van Dyke, and Flamenco Beach on Culebra.

Food can also be a bargain if shopped right. For example, on Barbados, a pound of fresh tuna at Oistins costs about \$3.50 compared with a plate from a vendor's stall (about \$15) or the ahi tuna dinner at the Fish Pot (about \$50). When you do dine out, enjoy food vans, roti and rum shops, fish fries and barbecues. Even Tony Anguilla has an under \$100 a night bed at Lloyd's Guest House and an economical meal at Hungry's Food Van, operated by a former five-star chef.

Still too pricey? The Curaçao Tourist Board is giving away a trip for two per day through May 23, plus a chance to participate in its \$500,000 island treasure hunt, to be held in August. Visit www.cura.caotreasure.com.

Patricia Borns can be reached at patriciaborns@comcast.net.