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on Making History*

THE ART ISSUE

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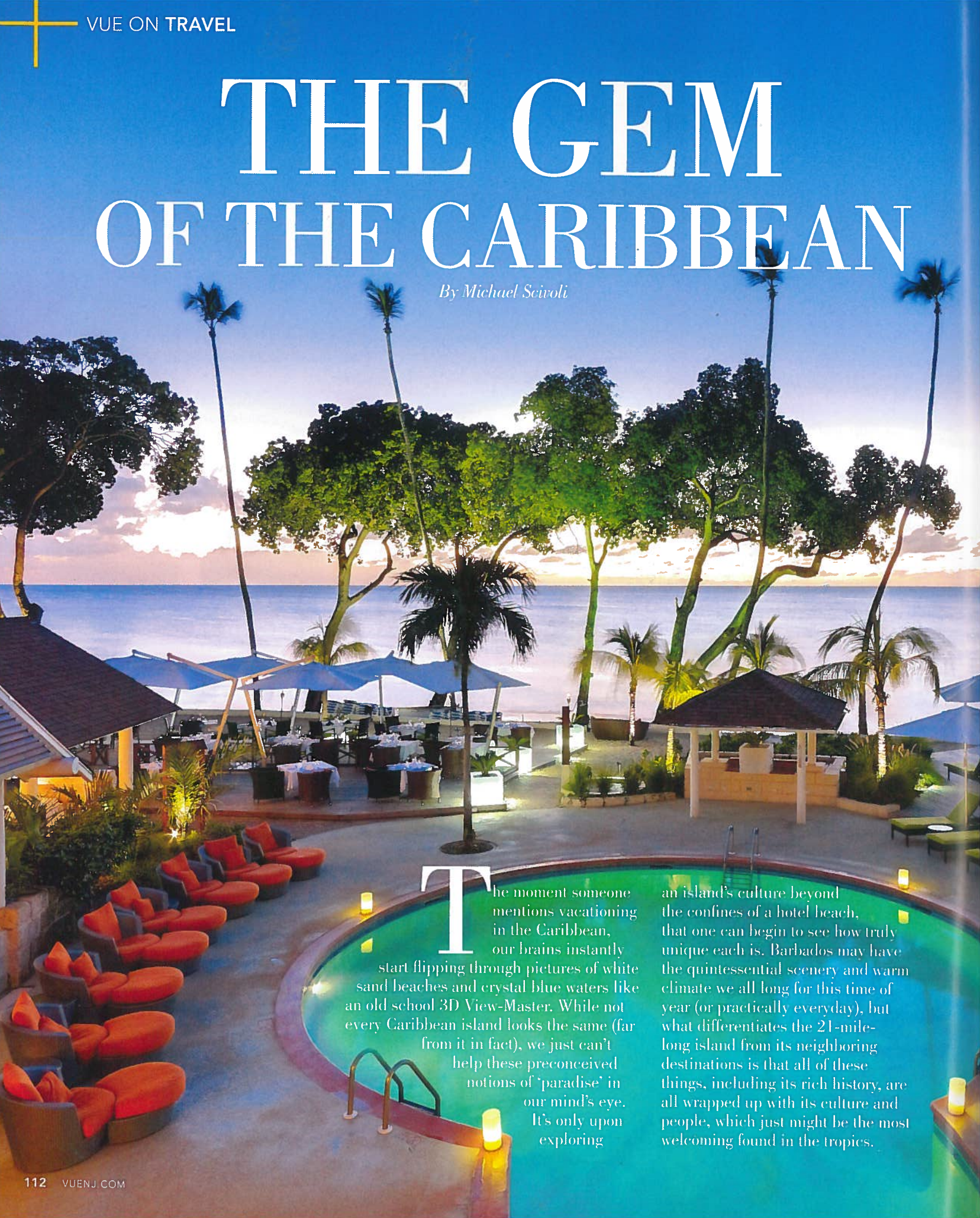
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THE GEM OF THE CARIBBEAN

By Michael Scivoli



The moment someone mentions vacationing in the Caribbean, our brains instantly start flipping through pictures of white sand beaches and crystal blue waters like an old school 3D View-Master. While not every Caribbean island looks the same (far from it in fact), we just can't help these preconceived notions of 'paradise' in our mind's eye. It's only upon exploring

an island's culture beyond the confines of a hotel beach, that one can begin to see how truly unique each is. Barbados may have the quintessential scenery and warm climate we all long for this time of year (or practically everyday), but what differentiates the 21-mile-long island from its neighboring destinations is that all of these things, including its rich history, are all wrapped up with its culture and people, which just might be the most welcoming found in the tropics.



BATHSHEBA BEACH (EAST COAST)



TAMARIND HOTEL

This past November, JetBlue made its first ever flight from Newark to Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados. As the largest airline in the Caribbean, JetBlue teamed up with government officials and high profile Barbadians to make the island more accessible to Tri-State residents. Joined by Miss Universe Barbados, Barbados Ambassador to the UN Keith Marshall and Plainfield, NJ's own Barbadian Mayor, Adrian Mapp, VUE hopped aboard this inaugural flight on JetBlue's brand new 150-seat Airbus A320 for a closer look at what the island has to offer.

One of the first things you'll notice about Barbados, other than the incredibly welcoming locals, are all the small reminders of British influence, in both customs and colonial architecture. Ironically, JetBlue's inaugural flight to Bridgetown coincided with the eve of Barbados' 50th Anniversary of Independence from Great Britain. Barbados, the easternmost island in the Caribbean, gained full independence in 1966, after having been a British territory since the 1600s. There's a real patriotism deep-rooted in every Barbadian and that extends to Mayor Mapp who was particularly ecstatic about the inaugural flight, dubbing himself "an unofficial ambassador" of Barbados.

At the center of the visit was our stay at the Tamarind by Elegant Hotels, a 104-room contemporary luxury hotel set along a pristine 750-foot stretch of white sand beach. Ideal for couples, families and even large retreats, the beachfront hotel

is located on Barbados' captivating western shore (or the Caribbean side). The hotel itself boasts breathtaking sea views, a modern open-air layout and complimentary water sports.

One of the things that makes the island's geography so incredibly unique is how different its beaches are from not only other islands, but from its own contrasting coasts. On the western shores, Barbados is the epitome of that 'picture-perfect-paradise' with clear, calm waters and pristine beaches, including incredible reefs (ideal for snorkeling, as the island itself is comprised of nearly 85 percent coral limestone). However, venturing to the east (Atlantic) coast has an entirely different feel, particularly Bathsheba Beach, where there is no shortage of jagged cliffs and roaring waves, certainly picturesque in its own right and regularly playing host to international surf competitions.

Physically, Barbados is a relatively flat island compared to its volcanic neighbors, making it faultless for exploring. Being that Barbados is only 14 miles wide including all of its 11 parishes (districts), with a population of roughly 285,000, one of the best ways to explore is to schedule an island safari jeep tour. While that might sound incredibly touristy, you'll get a great idea of the island's physical diversity and where you'll want to spend your time in just a few short hours (bonus: you'll also get a glimpse of Rihanna's \$22 million home and Simon Cowell's beachside retreat). Notable options include deep sea diving in the company of sea turtles, visiting the Mount Gay distillery (the oldest rum distillery in the world) and exploring Harrison's Cave in the island's central uplands.

In addition to gazing out into the sea beneath a set of royal palms,

Barbados is a renowned culinary destination, with everything from casual family venues to world-class gourmet cuisine. In addition to attending the island's Annual Food and Rum Festival, we had the opportunity to visit one of the island's most acclaimed restaurants, Cafe Luna. An open air, rooftop design located at Little Arches—a luxury boutique hotel set beside the unspoiled Enterprise Beach—the restaurant fuses Barbadian (or Bajan) fare with Mediterranean, African and West Indian food, creating a one-of-a-kind dining experience that simply cannot be duplicated. Helmed by Canadian Chef/Owner Mark (Moo) De Gruchy, Cafe Luna is everything one could love about fine dining without the stiffness (seriously, don't leave the island without trying Chef Gruchy's "Moo"jito). Overall, there's so much to love about the island's food and drink culture, especially its countless rum shacks and authentic variations of flying fish sandwiches, the country's national dish. If you're on the island on a Friday night, head to the southern coast for the fish fry at Oistins Bay Gardens.

Part of Barbados' allure is in its people, particularly how they treat guests and their undeniable sense of pride. This hospitality and patriotism extends to everybody from your taxi driver to government officials. And it's that neighborly, laidback culture coupled with the island's rich history that is so infectious, leaving one longing to return. "When you come here, just know we have people who are going to take care of you," Ambassador Marshall told us. When you visit Barbados, you'll not only realize how safe and relaxed you feel, but just why it's considered 'The Gem' of the Caribbean. Now with a direct flight on a leading airline like JetBlue, the chance to visit paradise is more accessible than ever before. 0

