

Barbados

BY ELAINE GLUSAC

The Longevity Plan

"WOULD YOU LIKE A DRINK, DEAR?" MARIA ELIAS ASKS.

I hesitate. "Um, it's 9:30 in the morning."

"You can't think of it that way," the Bajan says, smiling slyly behind the tour desk of the Mount Gay Rum Visitors' Center on the outskirts of Barbados' capital, Bridgetown. "You have to think, 'Somewhere in the world it's 9:30 in the evening.'"

In Hong Kong it's cocktail time, but here in Barbados it's the "snap" hour — snap being the island's rhythmic take on "toot," "bump," or any other noisy synonym for taking a shot. Thus I stand, sweating glass in hand, listening to Maria tell me that the founders of Mount Gay were, ironically, the Sober family from England, as I blush planters-punch pink for tanking up during the state-side rush hour. But like most who disembarked with me on a starry Barbados evening, I've come to dodge my harried home routine and to toast the rosy sunsets and honey sands with a rum-something. Although I didn't plan on sunrise with a shot, here in the home of rum I may have stumbled upon the Bajan fountain of youth.

The island, along with Japan, has one of the highest rates of centenarians per capita: about 50 in a population of 266,800. Bearing fruit and flowers, the prime minister or the governor general comes calling when a Bajan reaches 100. Some credit the rum. "Many of our more distinguished citizens, as I call them, put it in their coffee in the morning," says Maria, as we pass a wall of stacked rum barrels. "Gives them that extra pep in their step." Some early Barbados sailors called rum "kill-devil," perhaps because it was so bad it could kill the devil or so strong it could vanquish illness. Or, in my case, as I belly up to the varnished bar in the Mount Gay tasting room, because it eases guilt-demons and allows me to take nip number two: a snifter of Mount Gay Extra Old, a vintage blend aged at least 12 years and, by my nonscientific survey of rum-loving locals, the island's most revered sauce. I swirl it and admire its legs, hold it to the light to appreciate the caramel color, nose it, noting oak

and vanilla aromas and finally sip. At, ahem, 10:13 a.m.

The drink helps revise my agenda to an amble around Bridgetown, where streets like Trafalgar and High and buildings, including the coral-limestone Parliament, speak to British roots. But the taxi drivers haggling with mango hawkers, the shoppers shading themselves with floral umbrellas and the peeling, postcard-penning tourists at the harborside Waterfront Café indicate just how blissfully far we are from the formality of the motherland.

Bouncing around in the backseat of a taxi weaving through the sugar cane fields outside of the capital, my urge to doze signals a problem with the a.m. rum plan: lethargy. So I turn to a colonial fix in this most British of Caribbean islands: tea.

At 3:30 in the afternoon I sit down at The Fairmont Royal Pavilion — halfway up the tranquil Caribbean coast and three paces from the powdery sand — and for the second time today, I feel absurd partaking of an island ritual. Who takes tea at the beach with the sun glinting on the flat, inviting sea? Brits.

While many other Caribbean islands endured a succession of colonizers, the British exclusively ruled Barbados from 1627 to 1966 before islanders won their independence. Plantation owners originally sowed tobacco and cotton but, after receiving poor economic returns, they switched to sugar cane. Pressed cane juice, left alone, ferments. Though the ancients in the Far East may have juiced cane for alcohol, Barbados is credited as the first producer of rum, or "rumbullion," as recorded in 1703.

The British plantation owners, meanwhile, were loath to cede their afternoon tea tradition despite the swelter of the tropics. They may have been on to something. A coconut scone, clotted cream and two cups of sweetened Earl Grey turned out to be just the carb-fat-caffeine recharge I need on an 84-degree afternoon, an eye-opener with a calming effect similar to its chemical opposite, the morning snap. Barbados' fraternal saint-to-sinner (continued on page 111)





On Barbados' southeast coast, Bottom Bay is ideal for beach play, but not for bathing. Here, the Atlantic and Caribbean meet in a powerful stew. Opposite: The island is divided into 11 parishes, where churches and rum shops compete as "spirit houses."

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indulgences — one upper, one downer — moderate the run of the day to a genial and potentially life-prolonging stroll. And, I figure, a swim in the sea won't hurt my longevity plan either. I plunge in, backfloating in view of an Orange Crush sunset.

Rum, of course, isn't just for breakfast, though it is at 9:55 on another morning that I'm discussing the proper evening rum dose over a 20-rum blend produced by islander Keith Laurie, ex-senator, farmer, agricultural consultant and collector of upwards of 300 rums. I've searched him out in the island's breezy central highlands where farmhands, dressed in long pants and sleeves to guard against the blade-like leaves, cut dried cane and bundle it into wooden carts along the rural roads.

Mr. Laurie has made it his business to revive the old-fashioned rum cocktail of his parents' day some 50 years prior: a shot of rum, three shakes of bitters and a half-teaspoon of sugar, shaken over ice

and strained into a lowball glass. "Rum punch or planter's punch was a way to make the rough stuff palatable with one [part] bitter, two sweet, three strong and four weak." That's recipe-speak for lime, sugar, rum and water, respectively. Rum punch is still a hit on the resort circuit, but patrons of the island's many brightly-painted corner bars known as "rum shops" (and "houses of spirits") order rum by the bottle and mix their own cocktails, often with Coca-Cola. Laurie prefers his folks' more astringent concoction. "I think every restaurant should give one out free," he says. "It makes you ravenous."

That evening at dinner, I dictate the recipe to the server. It comes in a martini glass with a glossy cherry perched stylishly on the rim. After I take a sip, I swear allegiance to the Barbados longevity plan: morning rum, afternoon tea, evening rum. In sixty-some years, after I've retired to an island life of sunset bobbing and Barbados beach hopping, I hope to receive the prime minister's flowers. †