The Caribbean: Dreams vs. Reality

Many people arrive in Puerto Rico, Antilles, Antigua, Jamaica, or St.-Martin with wildly romantic expectations about its people, only to feel completely disappointed that everyone is dressed in Western clothing, and if there are indeed people dressed ethnically, it's only because they're selling you something.

This sort of disillusionment is most prevalent in the more populous parts of the Caribbean, such as Barbuda, Antilles, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Guadeloupe, although that's not to say that these islands really have nothing to offer of Caribbean culture you've come to expect.

One good tip is all that is needed to let go of all your preconceived ideas of what the Caribbean culture should be and let personal experience be your guide.

Traveling alone will give you a better chance of interacting with ordinary citizens. You can guess that independent travel does have its perks when it comes to experiencing an exotic destination such as the Caribbean.

Backpackers are especially fortunate to stumble upon a rural village and discover that most natives, even the poorest, are surprisingly open and hospitable. Some of them might even treat you to a glimpse of how the life of a real, full-blooded Carib is really lived, and you'll be astonished.

So if you really want to learn more about the Caribbean culture and its native civilization before written history, then head on to the isolated parts of the region where commercialization has yet to make its mark. The area of Antigua is as good as place as any to visit for a diverse cultural experience and sights around the islands.

If you don't want to visit just one island, you can always go island hopping. The Cayman Islands and the U.S. Virgin Islands can be the perfect destinations for such a cultural adventure. Charter boats are available almost anywhere around these areas, with a typically jovial crew ready to point out to you the sights and some fascinating stories and myths about them.

As for culture shock, it is often overstated in the Caribbean. All you need to do is allow a few days to adapt to the overall atmosphere of the islands. Expect that in less developed countries, there is a much higher level of grime and noise than you have at home. Expect that you might not be able to follow the language # something that can be prevented by studying the language before leaving home.

And if you feel somewhat like a target for crime, most people feel the same way. It's common. It helps if you try not to be too obvious as a tourist.