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Cities of Antigua and Barbuda

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Introduction

Nestled in the turquoise embrace of the Caribbean Sea, Antigua and Barbuda beckon travelers with their sun-drenched beaches and vibrant culture. Yet, beneath their postcard-perfect surfaces lies a fascinating tapestry of towns and cities that shape the nation's identity. Though the country is known primarily for its natural beauty, its urban centers—large and small—bear the imprint of centuries of change, resilience, and innovation. This book, *Cities of Antigua and Barbuda*, explores these vital settlements, offering a rich account of their histories and a practical guide for modern visitors.

Antigua and Barbuda, as a twin-island nation, is unique not just in its geography but also in its patterns of urban development. Despite being one of the least urbanized countries in the world, its towns and cities—especially along the corridor that stretches from St. John's to English Harbour—are the linchpins of its social and economic fabric. Within the framework of six historic parishes and two dependencies, each settlement tells a distinct story, colored by colonial conquest, the struggle for freedom, adaptation, and the day-to-day life of its people.

At the epicenter stands St. John's, the capital, a city whose colonial past is visible in its architecture, markets, and maritime infrastructure. St. John's has long been the commercial heartbeat of the nation, nurturing the arts, education, and commerce. The city has weathered earthquakes, storms, and social upheaval, yet its spirit perseveres—embodied in bustling waterfronts, centuries-old cathedrals, and lively marketplaces. Around it orbit towns like All Saints, with its echoes of sugarcane plantations and community resilience, and Liberta, whose very name is a testament to emancipation and new beginnings.

Moving beyond the capital, Antigua's smaller towns—from historical Parham, the island's original capital, to tranquil Potters Village and scenic Bolands—provide fresh perspectives on Antiguan life. Each has its own relationship to history, land, and the wider world, whether through ties to plantation heritage, tradition of craftsmanship, or their roles as gateways to beaches, harbors, and natural wonders. On Barbuda, Codrington stands as the solitary urban nucleus, its story shaped by isolation, ecological wonders, natural disaster, and the ongoing journey of its rebuilding.

Within these pages, you will not only discover the stories of these cities but be guided through their streets, landmarks, and lived realities. Rich in history yet alive to the present, Antigua and Barbuda's urban settlements invite both admiration and reflection. For visitors and locals alike, understanding the heart of the nation means experiencing its cities and towns—not just as destinations, but as living, breathing

communities.

As you embark on this journey through the great cities of Antigua and Barbuda, let this book serve as both a window into their pasts and a practical companion for your explorations. Whether you come seeking historical insight, cultural immersion, or the joy of discovery along hidden lanes and bustling quays, the cities of Antigua and Barbuda await with stories to share and experiences to be savored.

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CHAPTER ONE: Antigua and Barbuda in Context: Geography, People, and History

Antigua and Barbuda, a vibrant twin-island nation, lies nestled in the eastern Caribbean Sea, forming part of the Lesser Antilles chain. Geographically, these islands serve as a natural boundary, elegantly separating the vast Atlantic Ocean from the calmer waters of the Caribbean Sea. It's a location that has profoundly influenced their history, climate, and the very character of their cities and towns. The country is primarily composed of its two namesake islands, Antigua and Barbuda, along with several smaller cays and the uninhabited island of Redonda.

Antigua, the larger of the two main islands, spans approximately 281 square kilometers (108 square miles), while Barbuda, located about 48 kilometers (30 miles) to its north, covers an area of roughly 161 square kilometers (62 square miles). Redonda, a much smaller and rocky outpost, lies about 56 kilometers (35 miles) southwest of Antigua, adding another 2.6 square kilometers (1.0 sq mi) to the nation's total landmass. The combined land area of Antigua and Barbuda is 440 square kilometers (170 square miles), making it one of the smaller nations in the Caribbean.

The terrain of both Antigua and Barbuda is generally low-lying, shaped more by ancient limestone formations than by dramatic volcanic activity, which distinguishes them from some of their more mountainous Caribbean neighbors. However, Antigua does feature some higher volcanic areas in its southwestern region. The highest point on Antigua, and indeed the entire nation, is Mount Obama (formerly known as Boggy Peak), which rises to an elevation of 402 meters (1,319 feet). This peak is a remnant of a volcanic crater, offering panoramic views of the island's verdant landscape. Barbuda, in contrast, is flatter, with its highest elevation reaching a modest 44.5 meters (146 feet) within its highland plateau, located east of Codrington.

The coastlines of both islands are beautifully irregular, characterized by numerous pristine beaches, tranquil lagoons, and natural harbors that have historically served as havens for ships and, more recently, as prime tourist attractions. These shores are further enhanced by extensive reefs and shoals, which contribute to the islands' rich marine biodiversity. Due to relatively low rainfall, the islands have few natural streams and face challenges in maintaining sufficient fresh groundwater. Despite significant development in certain areas, particularly along the St. John's to English Harbour corridor, the country still retains large expanses of undeveloped land. Forest cover on the islands was about 18% of the total land area in 2020.

As of mid-2025, the estimated population of Antigua and Barbuda hovers around

94,209 to 105,182 people. This makes it one of the least populated countries in the Caribbean. The population density is approximately 214 people per square kilometer (555 people per square mile). Interestingly, Antigua and Barbuda is considered one of the least urbanized countries globally, with only about 24% of its population residing in urban areas as of 2023, although the rural population has been experiencing growth. Most of the nation's inhabitants are concentrated along the vibrant corridor stretching between the capital, St. John's, and the historic English Harbour on Antigua. The main driver of population growth in Antigua and Barbuda is immigration.

The history of Antigua and Barbuda is a compelling narrative of indigenous habitation, European colonization, and the enduring struggle for freedom and self-determination. The islands were first settled around 3000 BC by Archaic-period hunter-gatherers, known as the Ciboney, who likely arrived by canoe from Central and South America. They were later followed by the Arawaks, who introduced agriculture and cultivated crops such as the renowned Antiguan "black" pineapple, corn, sweet potatoes, guava, tobacco, and cotton. Around 1500 AD, the Arawaks were displaced by the Island Caribs.

In 1493, Christopher Columbus became the first European to sight the islands during his second voyage, naming the larger island "Antigua" after the Church of Santa Maria de la Antigua in Seville, Spain. Despite this early sighting, Spanish attempts at settlement in 1520 were unsuccessful, and Antigua remained uncolonized by Europeans for several decades. English colonization began in earnest in 1632, when a party led by Edward Warner established the first successful British colony on Antigua. Barbuda was colonized later, in 1678, and granted to the Codrington family in 1685, who controlled the island until the 1860s.

The introduction of sugar cane in the later 17th century dramatically transformed the islands' economy. This lucrative crop led to the establishment of large-scale sugar plantations, which, in turn, fueled the horrific transatlantic slave trade. A vast population of enslaved Africans was forcibly brought to Antigua and Barbuda, eventually vastly outnumbering the European settlers. The capital, St. John's, founded in the 17th century, quickly became a crucial colonial port and a hub for this sugar trade under British rule. It replaced Falmouth as the island's dominant city after a French invasion in 1666, officially becoming a trading point by 1675.

Slavery, a brutal and defining period in the islands' history, persisted until its abolition throughout most British colonies in 1834. The emancipation of slaves presented new challenges for the freed individuals, who often faced limited opportunities and continued to work on plantations for meager wages or sought livelihoods in burgeoning settlements. The 18th century also saw Antigua serve as the headquarters for the British Royal Navy's Caribbean fleet, further cementing its strategic importance within the colonial empire.

The islands remained under British colonial rule throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, experiencing various economic fluctuations and political reforms. The push for self-governance gained significant momentum in the mid-20th century. Antigua and Barbuda achieved associated statehood status in 1967, which granted them control over internal affairs while Britain maintained responsibility for defense and foreign policy. Full independence for the sovereign nation of Antigua and Barbuda was finally realized on November 1, 1981, with Vere Bird becoming the first prime minister. This marked a new chapter in the nation's history, as it joined the United Nations, the Commonwealth, and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States.

The post-independence political landscape was largely dominated by the Bird family and the Antigua Labour Party (ABLP) for the first two decades, with Vere Bird leading from 1981 to 1994, followed by his son Lester Bird from 1994 to 2004. Since independence, the country has focused heavily on developing its tourism industry, which has become a cornerstone of its economy. However, like many island nations, Antigua and Barbuda faces ongoing environmental challenges, particularly those exacerbated by climate change, such as rising sea levels and increased weather variability, which threaten both communities and the vital tourism sector.

Administratively, Antigua and Barbuda is structured into six parishes on the island of Antigua and two dependencies: Barbuda and the uninhabited Redonda. The six parishes are Saint George, Saint John, Saint Mary, Saint Paul, Saint Peter, and Saint Philip. Saint John is the most populous parish, encompassing the bustling capital city of St. John's. While Barbuda and Redonda are referred to as dependencies, they are integral parts of the state. Barbuda, however, holds a unique administrative status, having been administered by the Barbuda Council since 1976. Redonda, on the other hand, is administered under Saint John parish. Historically, parishes were governed by vestries during colonial times, but currently, they lack formal local government, although proposals for establishing parish councils have been made since the 2023 general elections. This administrative framework provides the backdrop against which the diverse urban and rural communities of Antigua and Barbuda have grown and continue to evolve.

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