



Travel

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After a very public challenge, **Rachel Johnson** gets tips from the pros in Antigua

ADVANTAGE MISS JOHNSON: Former British tennis star Annabel Croft puts Rachel through her paces at Curtain Bluff



I'm ready for our tennis match, Pippa... and I've found just the venue!

RODDY GRIMES/GRAME



WINNING SHOT: The stunning view from one of the verandas at Curtain Bluff

DON'T really like holidays, per se. They can be quite boring if, like me, you are hyperactive and can't lie on a beach for more than ten minutes without getting sunburnt. What I enjoy doing is playing tennis. In fact I am so tennis-mad that last year, when Pippa Middleton challenged my brother Boris to a whiff-whaff-off (a game of ping-pong), she very much put my dander up.

So, in this newspaper, I challenged her to a Miss Johnson v Miss Middleton Ladies' Lawn Tennis Singles match. Very quickly, I heard nothing back, so I

bearded her at a party. I asked her whether she would pick up my thrown gauntlet. Her eyes darted a little and she glanced at her minder before answering: 'Erm, yah.'

At this point I moved in closer. 'Your club or mine?' I pressed, whipping out my iPhone and opening up the calendar app. 'And when?'

To her credit, Pippa didn't yell 'SECURITY!' but murmured something about the courts at her club, London's exclusive Queen's Club, being busy

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Sipping cocktails in a villa that's fit for 007

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at that time of year and to 'speak to Sebastian' about the fixture 'at some point'.

But as far as I was concerned, it was game on. She was clearly raring to go!

Then people fell over themselves to tell me that Pippa not only runs around in tiny white shorts but is also a very decent player at Queen's. I realised I would need to do something. I couldn't take two decades off my age, or add more curvature to my bottom, so I'd have to raise my game. But how?

It was at this point that I had once of those serendipitous emails that change your life. I only had to look at the subject line from a friend of mine who is a travel supremo to know that all my dreams about winter sun and matchplay performance had been answered.

'Tennis week with Annabel Croft in Antigua,' the message field said, and the text began: 'Now I know you love tennis...'

I discovered that the tennis week was not only with glorious, leggy, tumble-haired Annabel, but also with heart-throb Andrew Castle – the former British No 1, Wimbledon commentator and star of *Strictly* – and the incomparable Owen 'Davo' Davidson, winner of 12 Grand Slam titles, mixed doubles partner of Billie Jean King, and owner of the most luxuriant white moustache in any hemisphere.

We arrived in Antigua after a painless direct flight on BA (there are also daily flights on Virgin) and a 30-minute taxi ride through green hills, past roadside huts selling Susie's Hot Sauce, guava jelly, and

tropical fruit, to discover that the location for our week of tennis drills with the pros was the most delicious and inviting imaginable. Curtain Bluff is a refined, family-run resort set on a bluff with two white-sand beaches on either side of the four tennis courts, so I could practise my backhand amid waving palms while gazing across azure seas to the belching volcano on Montserrat, only 25 miles away.

The hotel also offered so many enticing activities – from snorkelling on coral reefs to Zumba via every sort of water-sport imaginable – that even I would not get bored away from the court.

Tennis and the Caribbean is nothing new – Curtain Bluff has been running tennis weeks for 40 years and the adjacent resort Carlisle Bay has nine courts – but it is now a big thing. While I was on Antigua, Richard Branson was hosting a rival pro-am competition on his Necker Island with Rafa Nadal – 100 amateur places were on offer at a reputed \$25,000 a pop.

But I didn't envy them their Necker Cup as mine runneth over at Curtain Bluff. This is a hotel with close ties to the nearby village, Old Road. It employs many locals, and its Old Road Fund sends hundreds of young Antiguan students to college (instead of leaving tips, guests are asked to contribute to the fund). It has a community service ethic and a stirring backstory: one day the founder-owner Howard (later Sir Howard) Hulford, a pilot for Texaco, was flying over the breathtaking



POINT TO PROVE: Rachel practises her forehand, and right, the courts at the resort in Antigua

bluff, looked down, and announced: 'This is where I want to live.'

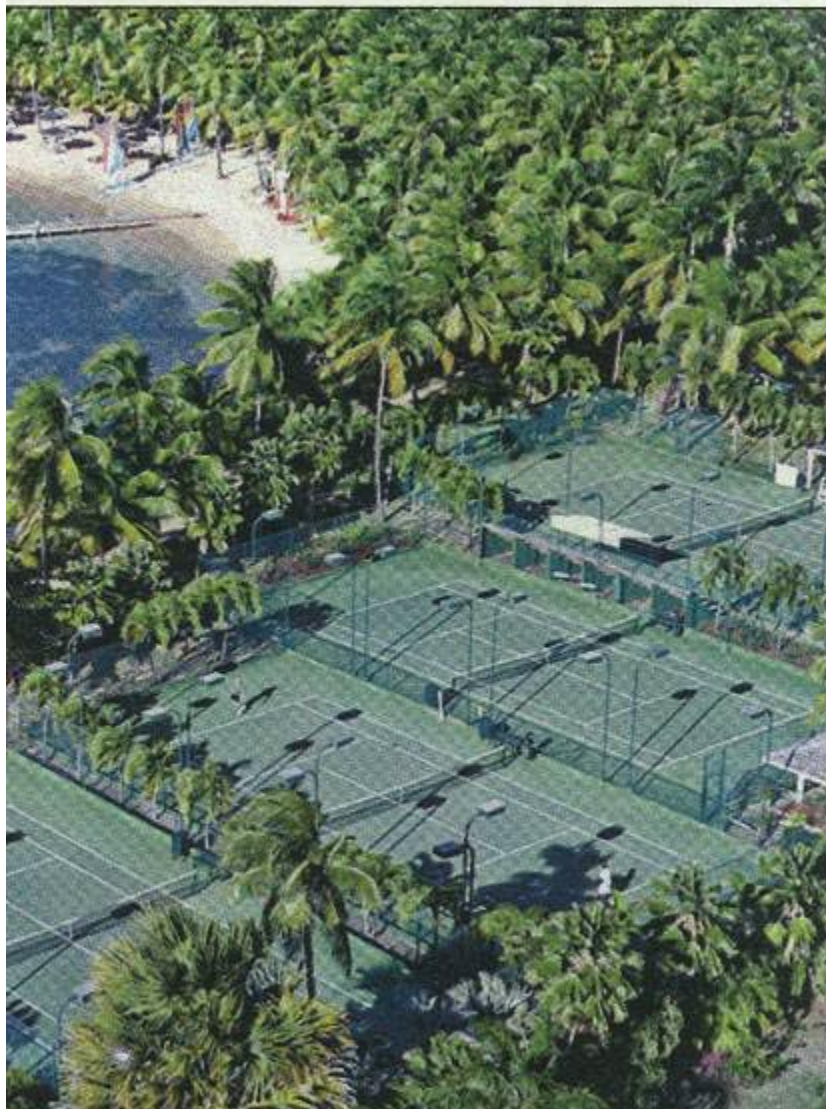
AND this is what living there, for tennis week at any rate, is like: after breakfast, drills start at 8.30am. Participants are divided into groups, and each group (no more than four or five) starts on court with a pro, who will impart his or her pearls of wisdom ('You're only as good as your second serve', 'Move your FEET!') as you plough yet another ball into the net.

This goes on for about two hours, after which, sodden with sweat, you will head to the beach, either to lie on a lounge drinking lime coolers, or to

plunge into the sea and snorkel around the bluff, where you will see tropical fish, stingrays, turtles, and even the odd sea snake. After lunch, it's back on court in clean tennis whites at 3pm, where you will play mixed doubles with Croft and Castle, who will sportingly cry 'Well done!' if you so much as manage a return of serve.

At 5.30pm, the pros start playing exhibition matches, often against those who have been trained with money from the Old Road Fund, and who started their tennis careers as ballboys on these same courts.

At 7pm, everyone gathers in their sparkly Caribbean casuals for cocktails, which is held once a week in the widowed Lady Hulford's spectacular Bond-style villa high on the bluff. It's



REX FEATURES

GETTING THERE

ITC Luxury Travel (itcluxurytravel.co.uk, 01244 355 527) offers seven nights at Curtain Bluff from £3,545pp on an all-inclusive basis, with return British Airways flights, transfers and participation in the tennis week activities. Forthcoming tennis events at Curtain Bluff include the Fantasy Tennis Camp with Tracy Austin and Johan Kriek from April 30 to May 4, 2014, and The Perfect Match with Annabel Croft and Andrew Castle from November 15 to 22. For further information on Curtain Bluff, visit curtainbluff.com.

the sort of place where really all the girls should be wearing white bikinis while 007 is lowered into the churning sea full of sharks.

Also carved into the bluff are a new spa and a gym, where yoga fans can do the downward dog as the sun melts into a lolly of colours and the cicada chorus becomes a crescendo.

I had a 'decompressor massage' in a room open to the elements, where my tight hamstrings and incipient tennis elbow were pummelled away to the sound of the waves breaking like a big expulsion of breath – in and out, in and out – on the rocks below.

If you want to leave the compound (and not many do), there's English Harbour and a host of Admiral Nelson-abilia to immerse yourself in (our naval hero lived here from 1784). There's the old dockyard, a museum and a lumber yard. It's a pleasure dome for yachties, boaties and fans of the Patrick O'Brian books.

ROUND the corner, at the entrance to Falmouth Harbour, there's a sensational French restaurant called Catherine's on the beach at Pigeon Point, which is very much *vaut le voyage*. Antigua is not as rock 'n' roll as it used to be, but Eric Clapton still has a pad here, and some pad it is too – you can see it from space. And every time we passed a

GAME ON: Pippa Middleton is renowned as a strong tennis player



bar, Curtain Bluff's manager, Rob Sherman, told us tales of Sting or Elton John or Clapton jamming there, back in the good ol' bad ol' days.

But I was there for tennis. I don't think I scored a point off a pro, but I hit a few good strokes, and learnt a huge amount in theory that I found impossible to put into practice under pressure. I know it's all in the footwork. And if you decide to lob your opponent, you have to go through with the stroke.

At tennis week at Curtain Bluff, one thing is as sure and certain as Croft's forehand: it's impossible not to have fun, get fit, and make friends. I took my husband, who was the proud winner of the wooden spoon at the end of the doubles tournament – but there were plenty of active singletons in evidence, who enjoyed mixing with the tennis stars, and who gave as good as they got.

At one point Castle offered to put a different grip on one lady's racket. He took off the old tape, put on a nice new one and handed it to her, asking if it was the right size. 'I don't know. How big should it feel in my hand?' she said innocently.

So tennis for four hours, a yoga class, a spot of snorkelling, and a delicious dinner in the restaurant on the beach – it's my perfect sort of holiday, even though it has to be said that playing tennis in 100 per cent humidity is no picnic. Still, it was a very good warm-up for my big match with Pippa. But on second thoughts, Pippa, let's not do it at your club or mine. Let's do it at Curtain Bluff.