



## RIDDLE OF THE SANDS

Cruise passengers ask the darnedest things.

MY CRUISE-SHIP CO-WORKERS and I used to say that when our passengers left home, they checked their luggage and their brains at the airport gate. These were not stupid people — quite the opposite, in fact. They were leaders of industry, lawyers or professors. Our biggest VIP (Very Important Passenger) was a NASA physicist. But for some reason, when we anchored off of palm-tree paradises and explored sandy shores, they'd go a little loopy.

"Is this thing connected?" one man asked me on a Virgin Gorda beach.

"Connected to what?"  
"To land somewhere?"  
"It's an island. It's not connected to anything."

"Oh, that's neat."

As the cruise director, it was my job to have all the answers, to confidently lead these people into the watery sunset with souvenirs and ice-cream sundaes in hand. No matter where we cruised — Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and back — our island adventures always left me speechless. "Is this snorkel gear waterproof?" asked one passenger.

"Where are all the undiscovered ruins?" asked another. Or how about, "What time does the 9:00 tour depart?"

Thankfully, the ship employed local experts — people who spent their lives working to find detailed explanations for every natural event. They could tell you the growth rate of a Belizean butterfly and the difference between a doctorfish and a surgeonfish. (No, it's not more schooling.) Their studies, however, failed to prepare them for the passenger who asked if she could snorkel *under* the island of St. John. "You can try," her guide

replied. There was one time at White Bay Beach on Jost Van Dyke in the BVI, when a guest asked if the water went all the way to the bottom. All the way to the bottom, you ask? Why, perhaps you should put on some of that waterproof snorkel gear and check for yourself.

No one meant to sound thick, of course. Especially dear Mrs. Haas, a retired nurse, who asked if there were inclines on Tortola's Sage Mountain hiking excursion. I gently reminded her that she'd be on a *mountain*, the very definition of an incline.

"It didn't say that in the brochure," she said.

"But it did say that you'd be hiking a mountain."

"I'm going to have to talk to someone about this. It made no mention of inclines, and people need to know!"

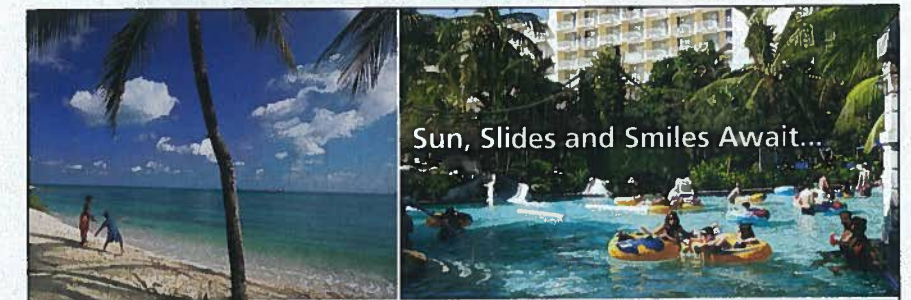
People do need to know. Snorkel gear is made to be waterproof. The water starts at the bottom. Islands are completely surrounded by water. And the 9:00 tour departs at — you guessed it — 9:00. I blame the islands, not the people. The improbable beauty and inherently laid-back lifestyles on islands the world over send the brain into a euphoric and irreversible overdrive (some would say underdrive). How can the water be so blue? How can island inhabitants, who in global terms have little, appear to have everything? And if people drive on the opposite side of the road in the U.S. Virgin Islands, why can't the 9:00 tour start at, say, 11?

Isolate the body, and the mind will quickly follow. By simply stepping foot on a distant island, the real world, along with the typical thought process, becomes a tiny, distant island of its own. You know what? It's OK. It's what they're there for. No worries, mon.

A grandmother of six was beachcombing on Norman Island in the BVI when she stopped to gaze at the breathtaking water. She told a naturalist that she wanted to bring some of the water home for her grandchildren, and the naturalist obliged. He got a plastic bottle with a lid and scooped up some water. When he showed it to the woman, she huffed, pointed into the distance and said, "Oh, no. I want the *blue* water!"

— MARC CAPPELLETTI

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