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AN APP FOR THIS?

BY DAVID LAHUTA

Gerald Singer doesn't know what he wants to be when he grows up. He hasn't known since he moved to St. John, USVI, from Buffalo 45 years ago. Now 68, the serial entrepreneur is knee deep in his latest project, a smartphone app based on his guidebook *St. John: Off the Beaten Track*. Gerald still takes hikes in the woods. He also putters around on his 15-foot rigid inflatable boat, the one he's tying up to a sunny dock at Caneel Bay right now.

Q: Do you always travel by sea?

A: No, but for me it's by far the easiest way to get around the island.

Q: But the guidebook app you created ... it isn't about traveling by boat.

A: Not everyone who comes here has a boat. But everyone drives, walks and carries a phone. There's so much to see here, if the app really were a "book," it'd be about a thousand pages. Who wants to carry that around?

Q: You have to be one of the original expats on St. John. How'd you find it?

A: It was a post-college funk. My father, who was a dentist, said I should visit one of his patients who had a place in the Virgin Islands. As soon as I got off that plane and took my first breath of tropical air? It was like a drug and I wanted more.

Q: The drug has changed, I imagine.

A: Physically, it's as beautiful as ever. But the way of life has changed. When I came to St. John, there were 800 people living here. Now it's about 4,200. Back then, there were two restaurants, a market, a liquor store and a pharmacy. None of them were well stocked.

Q: As a college grad, you probably knew how to live cheaply anyway.

A: Most of my food came from the sea. I'd dive for lobster and conch every day.

Q: And you stayed.

A: The biggest hurdle was coping with some form of scarcity. If you ran out of water, you'd have to wait for the barge to arrive from Puerto Rico, which could take

DAVID LAHUTA

two weeks or longer. To conserve water we all hung these signs in our bathrooms that read: "On this island in the sun, we never flush for number one."

Q: There's something fun about that.

A: It was the same for everyone. Most of us didn't have phones. When my parents wanted to get in touch with me, they'd call the police station and send an officer to my house. Someone would knock on my door and say, "Hey, your mother called!"

Q: The simple life at its best. But you still have to find work.

A: Yeah, well, you have to take what you can get on an island. I've been a commercial fisherman, a charter captain, I even used to deliver milk from St. Thomas to Tortola by boat.



"There's a clinic here but no hospital. If you need a specialist, you have to go to St. Thomas or farther, like Puerto Rico or the States. It's best to stay healthy. But then a loaf of organic wheat bread costs \$16."

Q: Then came the guidebook. How successful has it been?

A: The concept of success is different on an island. It's more difficult to earn what you would call "a good living." But I'm my own boss and make my own hours.

Q: And you live on a tropical island. That counts for something.

A: The sad part is that most expats come to the Virgin Islands for the beauty, the beaches, the hiking, everything you see in front of us. But then they become bogged down in everyday life and they don't take time to look up and enjoy what attracted them here in the first place. I think it's a shame.

Q: So, do you still enjoy what you came to St. John for back in 1969?

A: I wouldn't have it any other way. What I came for is right there in the app.

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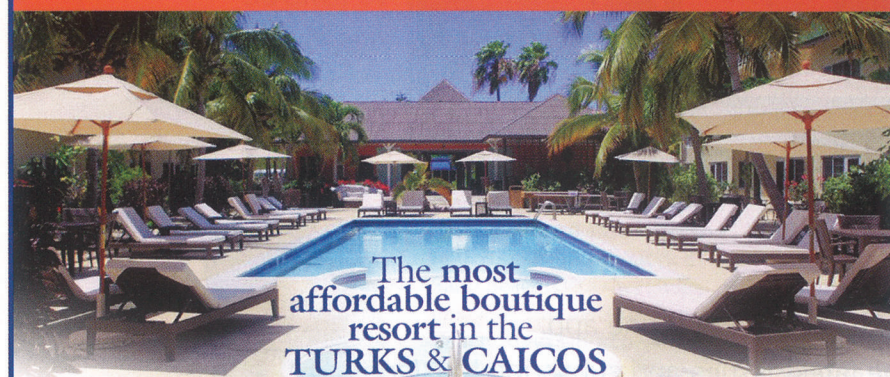
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