

BUON GUSTO

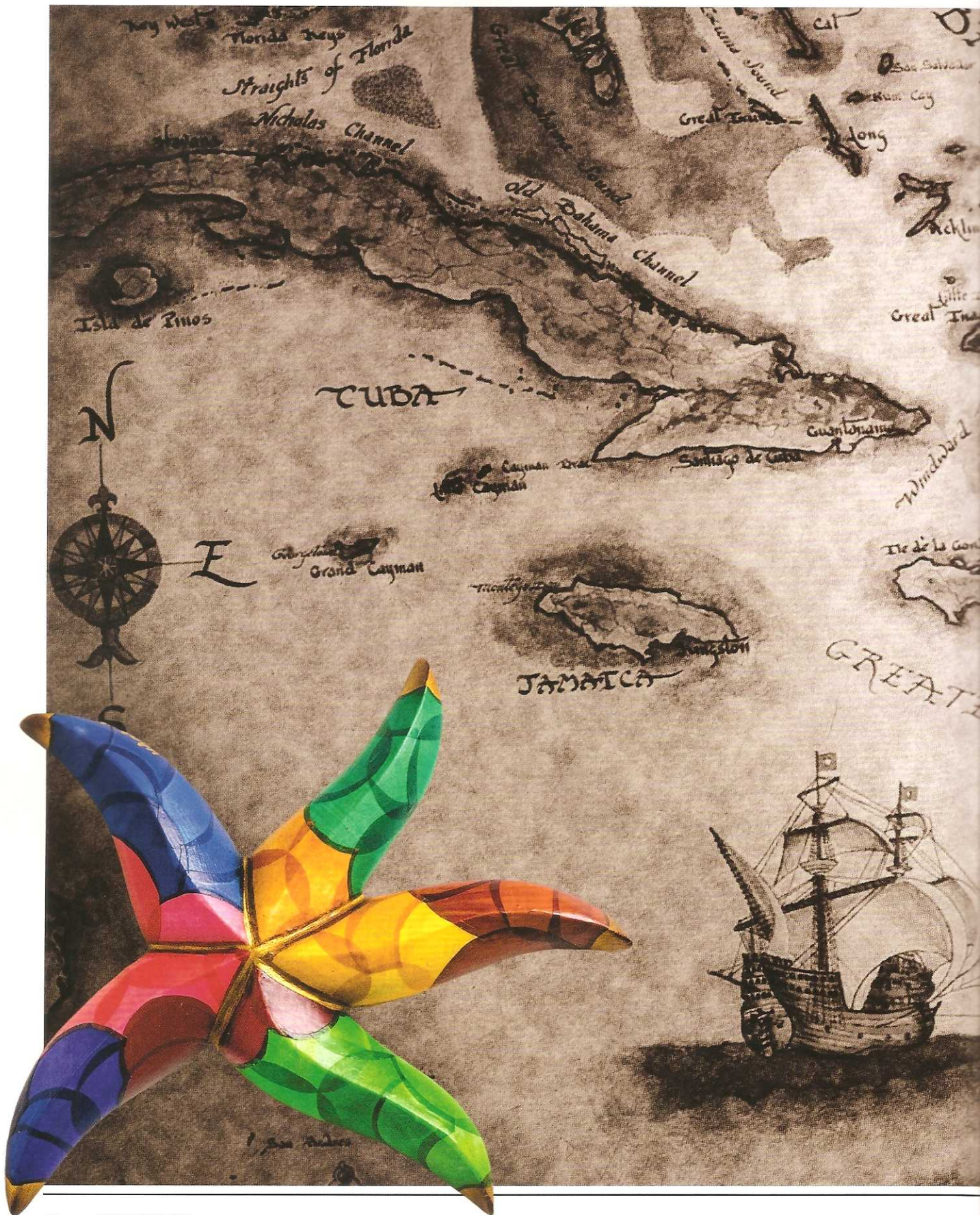
MSC CRUISES 2019-2020

**CARIBBEAN
NIGHT LIGHTS**
*Getting to Know
the Stars Above*

OCEAN CAY
*More Than Just
a Private Island*

MARTHA STEWART CRUISING

MSC and Martha:
A Match Made in Paradise





Treasure Hunting

BY RICHARD VARR

All around the Caribbean, many islands have their own jewels and traditions, often found nowhere else.

There's an expression for every mood: frowning, laughing, smiling and even a smart-aleck grin. They're emblazoned across brightly colored masks hanging on the walls, some with piercing eyes that stare. And ornately patterned pottery pieces line the display cases along with figurines of cats, butterflies, lizards and elephants showcasing a collage of cool blues, golden-toned yellows and muted earthen red hues.

Walk into any store in Aruba selling the island's unique mopa mopa art and you'll find color schemes with seemingly hand-painted preciseness and beauty. Surprisingly, however, the designs and creative swirls are not painted but instead tinted and shaped using delicate tree resin layers through a traditional handicraft process dating back more than a millennium.

Mopa mopa is just one example of some of the unique art forms, souvenirs and even treasures of sorts found only on certain Caribbean islands. Some are natural, like shiny conch pearls sold in Nassau. Others, including the smooth glass blue beads of St. Eustatius, highlight



the Caribbean's extensive colonial history. While barnacled cannons are always an exciting find, if you look closely enough — or if you're just lucky — you may run across small treasures and cultural sites found nowhere else.

Mopa Mopa

The process of forming mopa mopa's colorful layers stems from the Quillacingas Indians of northern Ecuador and southwestern Colombia. They picked the leaf buds from mopa mopa trees, boiled them to form a gummy resin and then added mineral

or vegetable dyes for color. Unique to this handed-down art form over the generations is how the gum is processed — pulled into thin sheets by workers using their hands and mouth. Resin layers are finally stretched onto wood and then trimmed with a knife.

"They say the masks scare off bad spirits in the house," says Maria Lopez, whose family owns several Aruba art stores including The Mask in the Renaissance Mall. "The Quillacingas tribe explains that you're supposed to choose the first one that 'speaks' to you — that was made for you."

Aruban souvenirs include mopa mopa pieces from The Mask (above and previous page) and djucu nut jewelry from Oma Bohemian Style on Pelican Pier (right).



Lucky Stones

Also unique to desert-like Aruba and neighboring Curaçao are decorative djucu nuts, often threaded into jewelry and keepsakes. Round, smooth and fitting in the palm of your hand, brown and black djucus grow on trees in Venezuela and wash down rivers into the southern Caribbean Sea. They're swept away by ocean currents all the way to island beaches after weeks afloat.

The locals say finding the nuts will give you luck. Jewelers and vendors selling from kiosks string them together to create necklaces, bracelets, earrings and other unique pieces. Djucus are also known as "lucky stones," as some believe they not only bring good luck but good health as well. Thus they're often found in casinos, worn by gamblers as good luck charms on chains around the neck, with some set in gold.

Brown and black djucus grow on trees in Venezuela and wash down rivers into the southern Caribbean Sea. They're swept away by ocean currents all the way to island beaches after weeks afloat. The locals say finding the nuts will give you luck.

Pink Pearls

While decorative conch shells and tasty conch dishes including fritters, salads and chowders are found throughout the Caribbean, shiny and pink conch pearls are extremely rare. Yet they shimmer in The Bahamas, if you know where to look.

"They're one of the rarest natural pearls," says Andrew Parker, the marketing manager of Nassau store Coin of the Realm, noting his shop has one of the largest collections of conch pearls in the world. "Conch pearls are estimated to occur in only one out of every 10,000 conch, and of that only a few percent are nice enough for jewelry."

Their colors can vary from reddish tones to orange and ivory, but they're mostly known as "pink pearls" — coincidentally similar hues to some Bahamian natural pink-tinted sand beaches. Technically, however, conch pearls are not pearls because they're calcium carbonate concretions from the queen conch as opposed to nacre, or mother-of-pearl, as found in oysters and other mollusks.

Nonetheless, they're formed naturally smooth, often with a flame-like pattern. "They look like candy — good enough to eat," says Andrea P. Major, President of The Bahamas Historical Society. "They're just a conglomerate of natural wonder. They're not cheap, but they're lovely."

Parker says the rare finds are usually made by fishermen who sell the pearls to jewelers. Conch pearl sizes can range from a tiny grain to some of the largest pieces found, maybe 30 and 40 carats, as they are often weighed like diamonds, rubies and emeralds. They're added to pendants, earrings and necklaces that can cost several hundred dollars up to \$20,000 and \$30,000 and higher. "Everything is custom made around the shape of each conch pearl," says Parker.



18k gold, 4ct. conch pearl and diamond leaf pendant (above); Saba lace pattern book and lace detail (right) and blue beads from St. Eustatius (far bottom right).

Saba Lace

A unique Caribbean tradition hails from the rocky and mountainous Dutch island of Saba, just off the shores of St. Maarten. Shops in the hilly and green village of Windwardside sell so-called Saba lace — napkins, scarves, blouses and other garments with patterns delicately hand-stitched by local women. "You really have to like it and I do," says Imelda Peterson, a local resident who has been involved with the needlecraft since she was a child. "If you're going to put in the amount of work and time, you do it right."

Peterson is one of a dozen or more women that often work together in group meetings to continue the nearly century-and-a-half tradition. It started in the 1870s when a young Saban woman left the island to study at a Venezuela convent where nuns taught her the art of sewing lace. Upon her return, other island women learned the craft, which eventually became a mail-order business with colorful lace designs dotting dresses, tablecloths, pillowcases and more.

Also known as "Spanish Work," Saba lace remains a means of support for some families. "It's a souvenir of Saba that's made on Saba," says Peterson. Yet continuing

the tradition has been at times a struggle as it's often difficult to get younger people interested in the craft. "We're willing to teach anyone and everyone who's interested in it," she says.

Blue Beads

Also off the shores of St. Maarten, the dormant volcano known as The Quill dominates the view on the small Dutch island of St. Eustatius, known locally as Statia, where plucking historic blue beads washed up on island beaches is

considered a lucky find. "They were used by the people of St. Eustatius 200-300 years ago, so you can feel history in your hands," says Walter Hellebrand, a Statia native and the island's monument director. "I deemed them such an important part of our culture and heritage that I included them when designing the coat of arms of our island. So they're a part of one of our national symbols."

The mostly pentagonal-shaped glass beads were used for barter and thus

once considered currency. Made mostly in Amsterdam, they were traded in Africa and thus involved with the slave trade. Also round and having other shapes, the beads got their color from cobalt used during the glass-making process.

Once plentiful on the island, blue beads are now hard to find. "They're becoming more and more of a rarity because so many have been taken off the island," explains Hellebrand. Yet many longtime residents have collected blue beads

over the years and have strung them into necklaces and other ornamental jewelry. "In the '70s, they found them by the handfuls," he says.

If you're lucky enough to find one, Hellebrand urges not to take it home, lamenting the local museum's blue bead collection was stolen. "They're part of our cultural heritage — taking them means our heritage is leaving the island," he says. "If I can change one person's mind, it's worth it." ■

