

When a crew led by Carib Indians set sail,  
their mission reached out to the distant past —  
but it could not have been more current.

# A Voyage BY MIKE GRUDOWSKI Out of Time

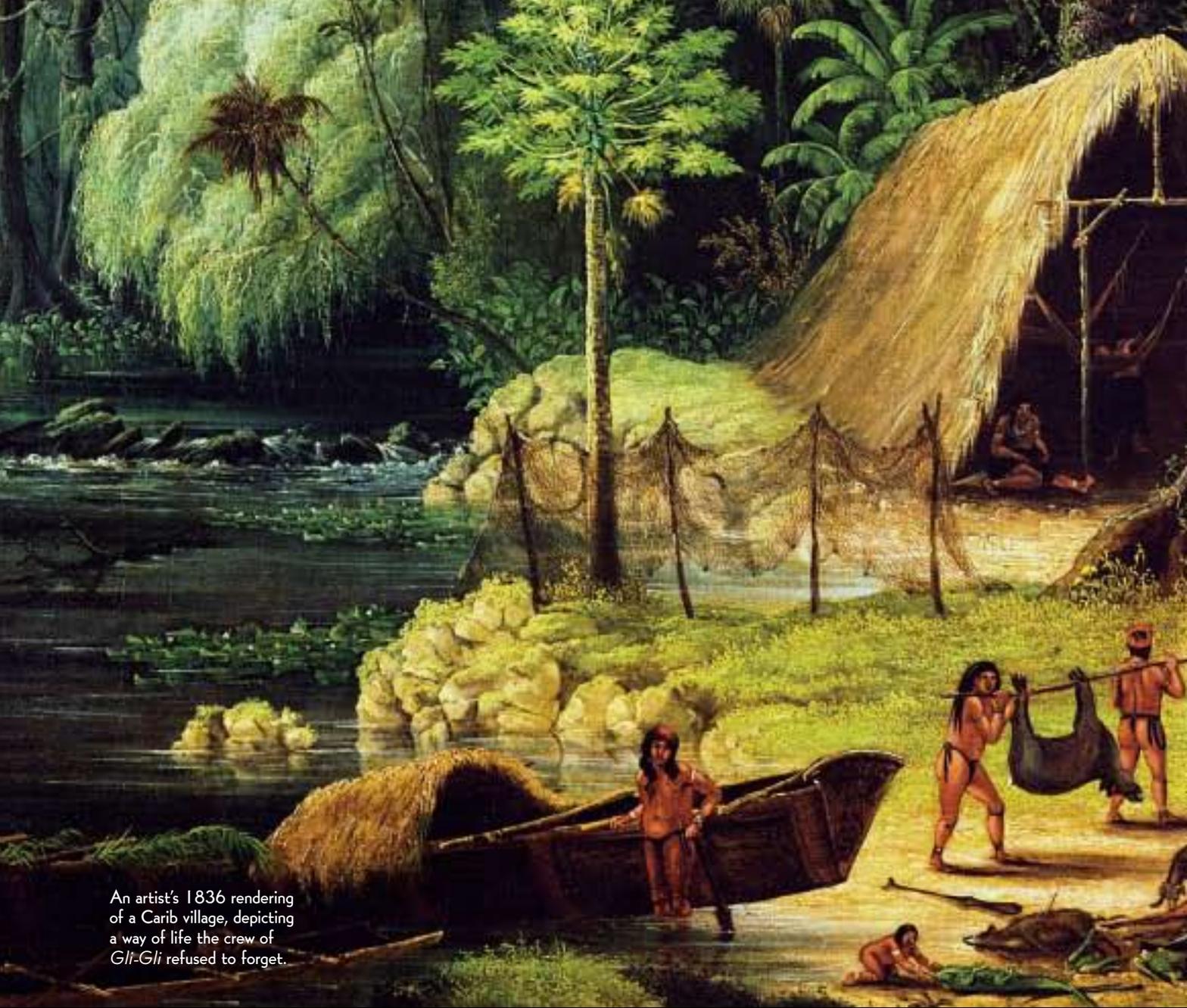
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MACDUFF EVERTON



B

Y THREE O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON, ANYONE could see that something was up at Sandy Ground. A crowd of people milled about on the beach at Anguilla's deep-water port while a steady stream of cars dropped off passengers to join them. Banners flew from scaffolding. A voice echoed from a loudspeaker: "Testing. Testing."

Four o'clock came; the boat should have arrived by now, but there was no trace of it on the blue horizon.



An artist's 1836 rendering of a Carib village, depicting a way of life the crew of *Gli-Gli* refused to forget.

Older couples strolled near clusters of restless teenagers; mothers and grandmothers carrying babies sat in the shade near lawyers and laborers; policemen and dreadlocked Rastas waited near a former chief minister. Every so often a madman on the dock would shriek a string of curses and then lapse dormant again, unheeded. Schoolchildren were everywhere: bright-eyed little girls with plaited hair, boys swinging on the rungs of scaffolding. Hundreds of people filled a hundred yards of beach.

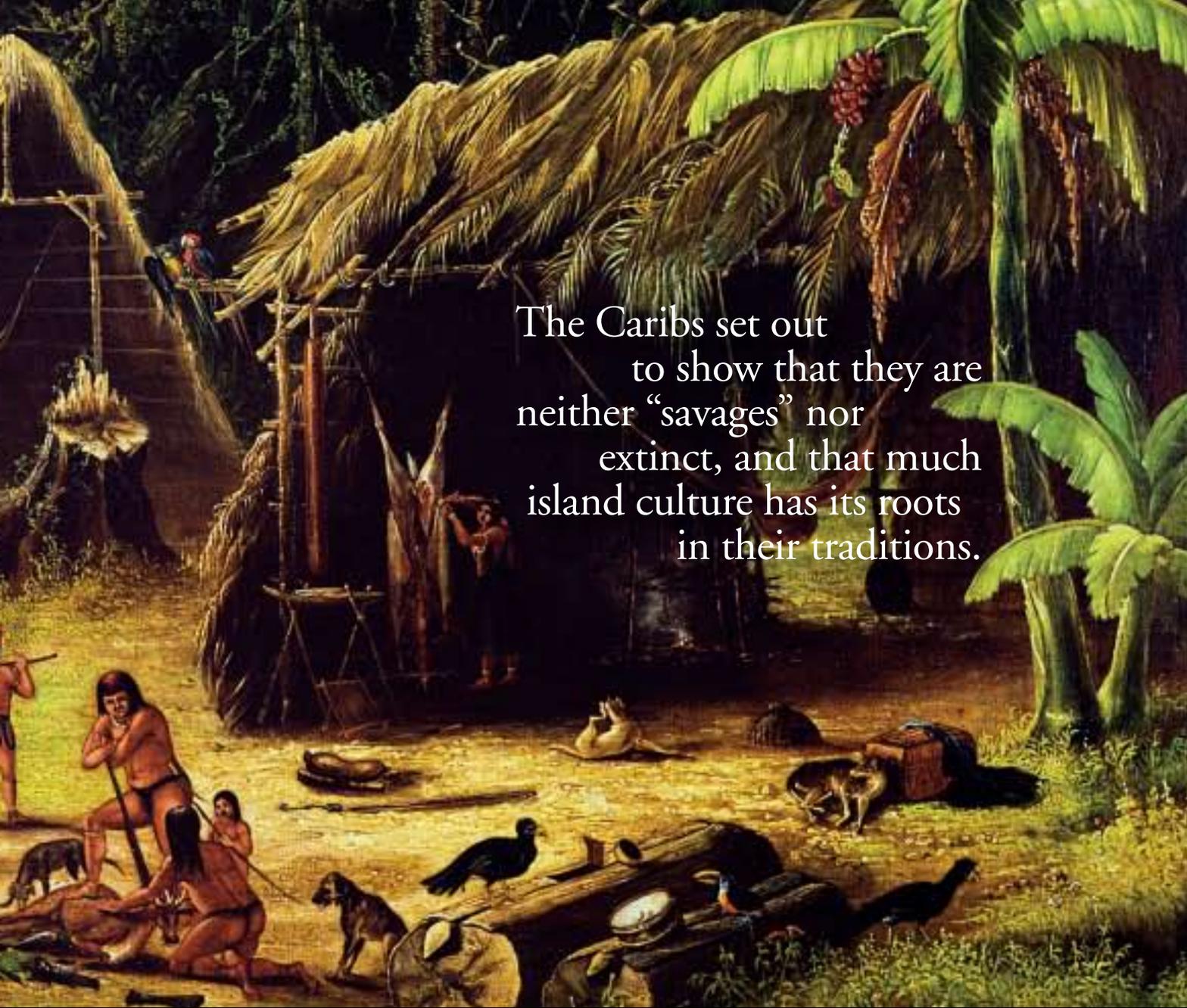
Finally, after more than half an hour, a shout went out: *There they are!* A hush fell as every eye followed the progress of a 35-foot-long, brightly painted wooden canoe flying a single sprit-rigged sail with a petrolyphic design emblazoned on it, lit by the westering May sun.

Aboard the boat sat Carib Indians from the island of Dominica, men and women whose ancestors had navigated craft like this one long before Columbus set sail. Her long, narrow

hull cut smartly through the calm harbor. Radio announcers, broadcasting live, blurted out rapid-fire patter as if calling a dead-heat Kentucky Derby.

The canoe sat becalmed for a minute; then it caught a gust and glided into the beach. A roar of approval arose from the crowd, and many pressed in for a closer look. A hundred strong hands lifted the boat up the strand and out of the water. The loudspeaker blared out welcome and congratulations. Hailed like conquering heroes, the crew gazed around, clearly stunned at the turnout. In every sense, the *Gli-Gli* had arrived.

THE COURSE THAT LED UP TO THIS EXQUISITELY unscripted moment had been set 12 years earlier, when a Tortola-born artist and sculptor named Aragon Dick-Read boarded a bus in Dominica. As it happened, he sat next to a Carib artist and activist, Jacob Frederick, and once they struck



The Caribs set out to show that they are neither “savages” nor extinct, and that much island culture has its roots in their traditions.

TOP: W.S. HEDGES/MICHAEL GRAHAM-STEWART/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY; RIGHT: COURTESY ARAGORN DICK-READ



### IN THE BEGINNING

With centuries-old techniques and modern tools, Carib craftsmen from Dominica transformed a *gommier* tree (left) into the *Gli-Gli* in the 1990s. After hollowing the trunk into a hull (below), the builders shaped the craft (right) with rocks, sand and water heated to near-boiling.





"We're all a pretty tight gang," says Aragorn Dick-Read (left), the artist who dreamed up the voyage. Below, *Gli-Gli* crew members on shore leave in Anguilla.



villages on the island's windward northeast shore where around 4,000 Caribs live. There Aragorn met Etienne "Chalo" Charles, a slight but powerfully built Carib who still makes oceangoing dugout canoes in precolonial fashion from tall, straight trees called *gommiers* (although, unlike his forebears, he uses chainsaws and galvanized nails). Thus in 1995 with Aragorn's encouragement and backing and Chalo's expertise, *Gli-Gli* began to take shape. (Its name means "sparrow hawk," long a Carib warrior symbol of bravery.) First a tree was felled on a steep Dominican slope and roughly hollowed out. Then it was hauled and rope-guided down the mountain and filled with sand and water, which was brought to near-boiling by hot stones, stretching the hull and giving the boat greater beam.

In 1997 the finished canoe, crewed by 11 Caribs and shadowed by a support boat (with Aragorn and others aboard), set out south from Dominica on a two-month, 800-mile sail to Guyana — the first such voyage, a Carib chief declared, in 500 years. Rather than a strict historical reenactment, Aragorn explained back then, the adventure was "primarily a symbolic gesture to reconnect the Carib tribe of the Southern Caribbean." Funded by a foundation grant and sales of T-shirts and Carib crafts en route — and

## A warm reception awaited the Caribs on each island, but

up a conversation, they quickly learned that they shared an interest in the Caribbean's pre-Columbian culture and what still remained of it. "Within an hour of knowing each other," says Aragorn, who is now 41, "we conceived of this idea to make a big canoe. Jacob had envisioned trying to reunite his tribe a little bit in the region."

The recent history of the Island Caribs (or Kalinago, as they originally called themselves) parallels that of many indigenous peoples in the Americas and elsewhere. Gradually subdued by European conquerors despite fierce resistance, they have ended up mostly on the economic margins of the islands they once controlled. Their bloodlines have mingled with those of other ethnic groups over the centuries. "There's a sort of Carib diaspora all around the region," says Aragorn. What's more, they have had difficulty shaking off a lingering misconception that their ancestors were cannibals, despite the paucity of archaeological evidence. Until recently, Aragorn says, even the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary* still cross-referenced the word *Carib* to the word *cannibal*.

There remain pockets in the region where Caribs still hold to a strong sense of their cultural identity and heritage: on Trinidad, on St. Vincent, in Guyana and in Dominica's Carib Territory, a cluster of isolated farming and fishing

with a BBC film crew tagging along — that first trip set the pattern that this year's journey repeated. At each island where they stopped, usually for several days, the crew gave talks and played traditional music to draw attention to the fact that Caribs are neither "savages" nor extinct as a people, and that much island culture has its roots in the traditions of the Caribbean's largest surviving indigenous tribe. Other than a single capsizing in rough seas early on, smooth sailing prevailed. Along the way they took special note of lingering remnants of their ancestors' civilization: not just in the handful of Carib enclaves but also in petroglyphs and fishing canoes on Martinique, in certain islanders' distinctive facial features on St. Lucia and in a few remembered ancient phrases spoken by elders on St. Vincent. (The Caribs from Dominica mostly speak Creole French among themselves.)

At journey's end, the *Gli-Gli* was towed back north, first to Dominica, then to a thatched-roof boathouse near Aragorn's BVI studio in Trellis Bay. But no one considered its mission fully accomplished. "We were talking about a second voyage," Aragorn says, "right after the first one."

AND SO LAST MAY THE CANOE SET OUT AGAIN, this time north from Antigua toward the Leeward Islands



nothing prepared them for what happened on Anguilla.



"A massive outpouring": More than a tenth of Anguilla's populace welcomed the voyagers (above), including former chief minister Sir Emile Gumbs and reggae musician Bankie Banx (left). Islanders got a hands-on feel for Carib boat-building (below) and craftsmanship (right).





On Anguilla, the crew visited a petroglyph-adorned cave 60 feet underground called the Fountain. There, as their ancestors once did, they sang a prayer-like “calling song.”



north of Dominica, where many Caribs live but little sense of Carib identity endures. Once again *Gli-Gli's* crew comprised nine Carib men and two women, more than half of them veterans of the 1997 voyage and ranging in age from 19 years old to 70-year-old master gommier-builder Hyacinth Stoute. The crew also included a father and daughter and three father-and-son pairs, among them Chalo, the boat's now-69-year-old maker and captain, and his son Augustine, an apprentice builder. The expedition had secured a sup-

port boat “with typical *Gli-Gli* luck,” as Aragorn puts it, when the topsail schooner *Fiddler's Green* sailed into Trellis Bay in March. When its Australian owner, Doug Watson, fresh off an Atlantic crossing, got wind of the imminent canoe voyage, he quickly signed on.

This voyage would be shorter than the first — nine islands in 20 days, covering some 300 nautical miles — but its scope was no less ambitious: a further quest for respect and recognition for the Caribs' place in the culture. Aragorn and his co-director, John Francis, arranged hosts at each stop; they scheduled musical performances and appearances at schools (sometimes 10 in a single day) and drummed up “a massive outpouring of interest,” says Aragorn, through island media outlets. “It's politely

provocative, is how we think of it,” he explains of the trip's purpose. “We're not an activist group. It's more artistic. It's grass-roots positive rather than grass-roots aggressive.”

The crew quickly settled into a familiar routine. Out on the open ocean, fresh breezes and gently rolling seas seemed to follow the boats; only in rare instances did larger swells threaten to swamp the canoe, a fate the crew averted by shortening the sail. The mariners subsisted on ground provisions — cassava, plantains, dasheen, yams — sometimes

Canoeists Hyacinth Stoute (with banjo) and Augustine Charles (with *shak-shaks*) rock an Anguillan schoolhouse.



diving for lobsters and conch and fishing for tuna and bonito. Four chickens aboard *Fiddler's Green* donated eggs for breakfast. Each time they landed, the crew's Carib spokesman, Paulinus Frederick, would address the crowd, which was sometimes large and boisterous, sometimes small. There were workshops in Carib basketry, carving and drumming. Inevitably the Caribs would launch into a jam session of sorts: one playing a conga; Hyacinth, a four-string homemade banjo; others on the *shak-shaks* (hollow rattles like maracas) or *toc-tocs* (hand-held wooden sticks struck together). Paulinus alternately drummed, played a bamboo flute and led Carib chants. It rarely took long for onlookers to progress from foot-tapping to subtly gyrating to ecstatically dancing. Some nights the crew bunked aboard *Fiddler's Green*; sometimes, in donated lodgings. Sometimes they camped on the sand.

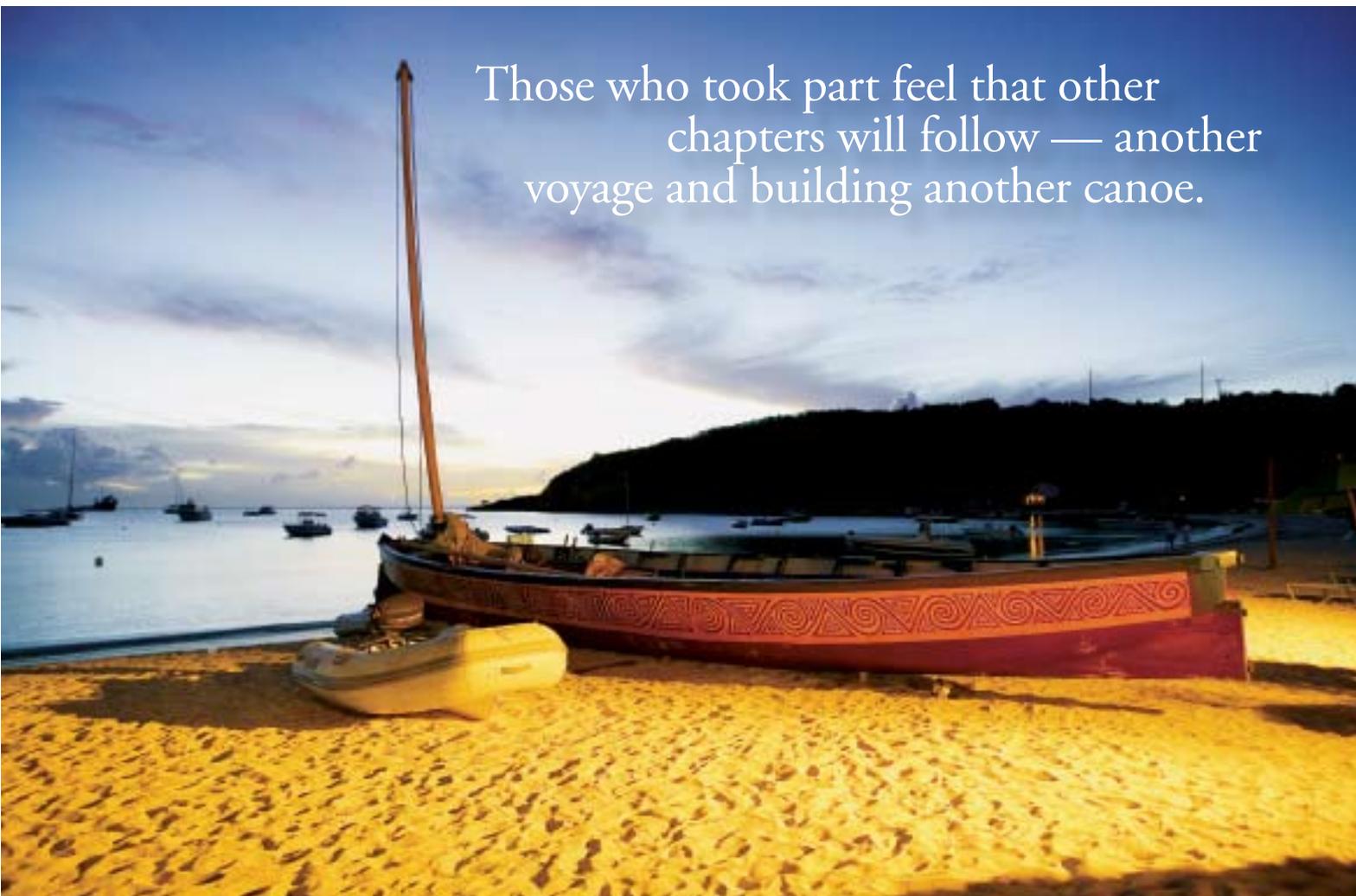
ALTHOUGH A WARM RECEPTION AWAITED THE Caribs on each island — on Nevis, St. Kitts, St. Barts, St. Martin — nothing prepared them for their welcome on

Anguilla, near the voyage's finish. More than 1,500 people greeted the expedition — more than a tenth of the island's entire population. Among them stood Bankie Banx, an acclaimed Anguillan reggae singer dressed in flowing white with impenetrable sunglasses and a black cap.

"What you have to understand is the passion Anguillans have for sailing," Banx said shortly before the *Gli-Gli* arrived. "It's our official national sport. It's soccer and cricket and football rolled into one. Anguilla is a rocky, scrubby island hard to

*Continued on page 140*

Those who took part feel that other chapters will follow — another voyage and building another canoe.





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Continued from page 103

make a living on, so Anguillans have always turned to the sea and boats. It's in our blood."

Once the Caribs landed and stepped out of the canoe, they were quickly mobbed by scores of excited spectators and scribbling reporters and then ushered onto a stage erected on the beach. Paulinus hushed the crowd to thank them, and loud laughter rippled out when he assured them the Caribs had come not with weapons to reclaim their island, but to bring music in the spirit of uniting all West Indians. Then the music started, and food was laid out for the crew. Rum flowed, and the electric scene lasted late into the night. "We realized," Aragorn would later write, "we had stirred a nation."

Within a few days the voyage would quietly end on Tortola. The Caribs retreated to their quiet Dominican villages; Aragorn to his wife, two boys and studio in Trellis Bay; *Gli-Gli* to its shore-side nest nearby. Another chapter in the modern voyages of an ancient people had closed. Yet more than ever, those who took part share a feeling that other chapters will follow. Already, Aragorn reports, there's talk of another voyage, perhaps joined by other Amerindian groups, extending the mission to the western Caribbean all the way to the Yucatan Peninsula. The younger boat-builders on Dominica who joined this year's voyage are thinking of building another canoe. "There are lots of people lined up to get involved," Aragorn says.

"*Gli-Gli* is a boat that was made for voyaging," he adds. "It doesn't like to go out and come back to the same harbor."

Peter Muilenberg contributed reporting to this article.

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