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A Traveller's History of the Caribbean

James Ferguson
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Ferguson's in-depth guide to the Caribbean-from the arrival of its indigenous races to the political climate of the region in its current state-is a necessity for the tourist whose tastes are broader than pink sands. This is not a quaint telling of the Caribbean's best tourist enclaves. No great emphasis is made of the music or food of the region. Rather, through offering detailed histories of many of the region's islands, Ferguson paints a picture of a diverse and dynamic area of the "New World"-which continues to evolve even today.

Ferguson opens with details of the geographical composition of the islands in the Caribbean. He speaks of their genesis-largely through volcanic action -and offers reasons for the relative fertility of some islands in comparison to others. This detailed mention of the landscape, however, seems only to serve as a segue into the people who make the region what it is. Beginning with the cultures of the Tainos, Caribs and Ciboneys, Ferguson highlights the virtual extinction of these peoples through European imperialism, while offing vivid scenes of the many times in which islands changed hands; explaining for the reader the multiple European influences evident in some islands today. Ferguson does not glorify the European bid to conquer, but rather honors the indigenous people as well as the Africans who were slaves there and the Chinese and East Indians who came later. He gives equal credit to key European figures such as Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain as well as important Caribbean figures such as the Taino cacique, Hatuey.

Reading like a novel, each of Ferguson's tales heightens the thrill of the previous chapter. In allowing voices of historians from the region into the text, the book always seems to offer a credible story and history of the Caribbean. Those wanting only a superficial understanding of the region will be disappointed. The discussion of music and the invention of tourism are touched only as the book nears its close. Others will recognize the works individual merit as well as a great companion piece to Ferguson's Traveller's Literary Companion: Caribbean. An excellent portrait of the Caribbean, A Traveller's History of the Caribbean will be equally meaningful for both the student and the traveler. Maps, illustrations and a chronology of events dating from 500 BC to present day give cohesiveness to the book.

LISA ARCHIBALD (December 16, 1998)

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