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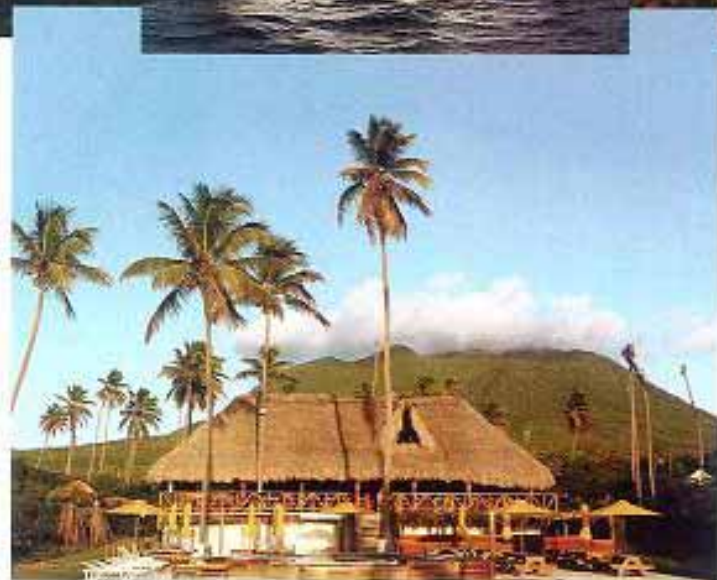
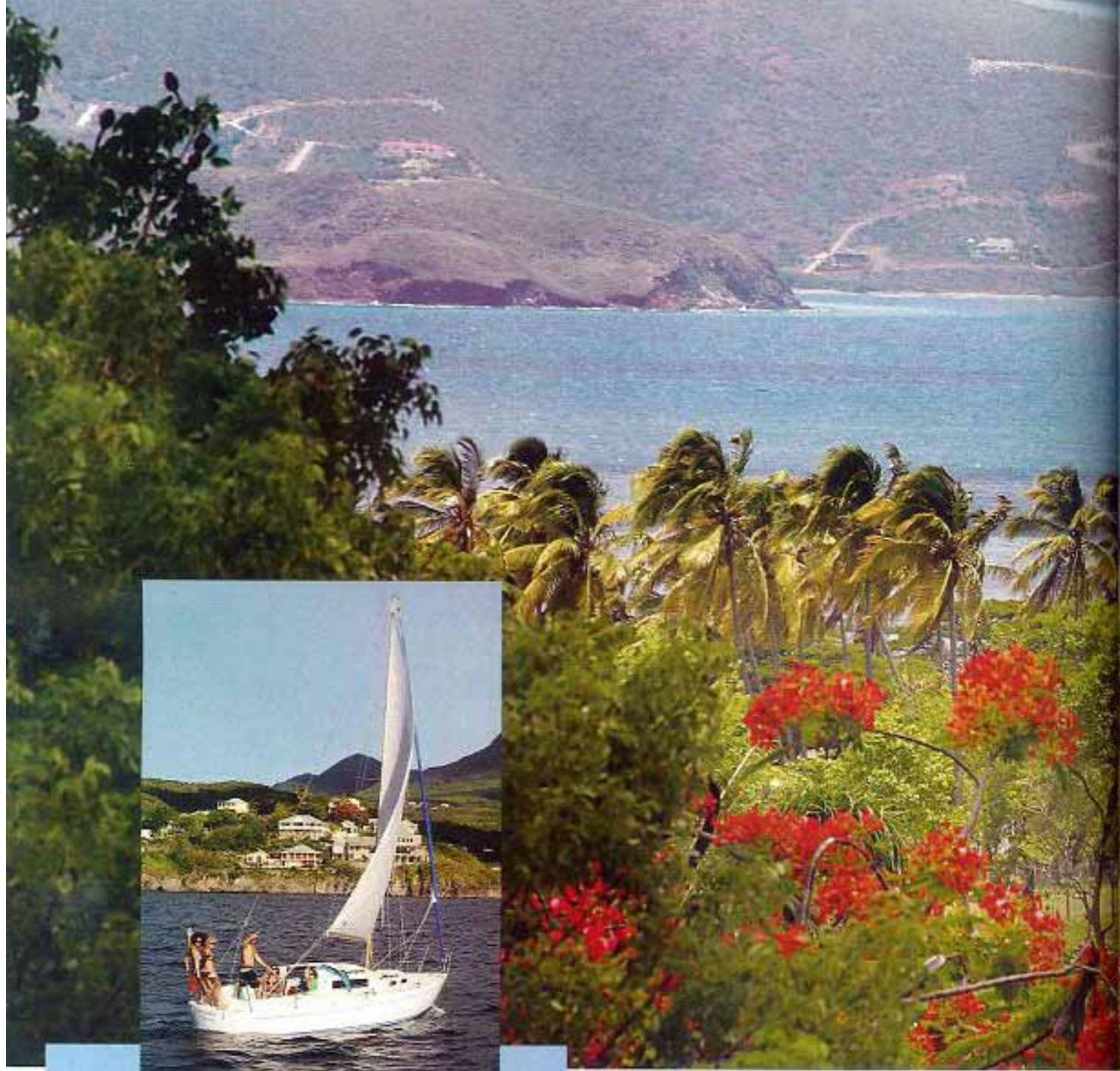
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Forgotten ISLAND

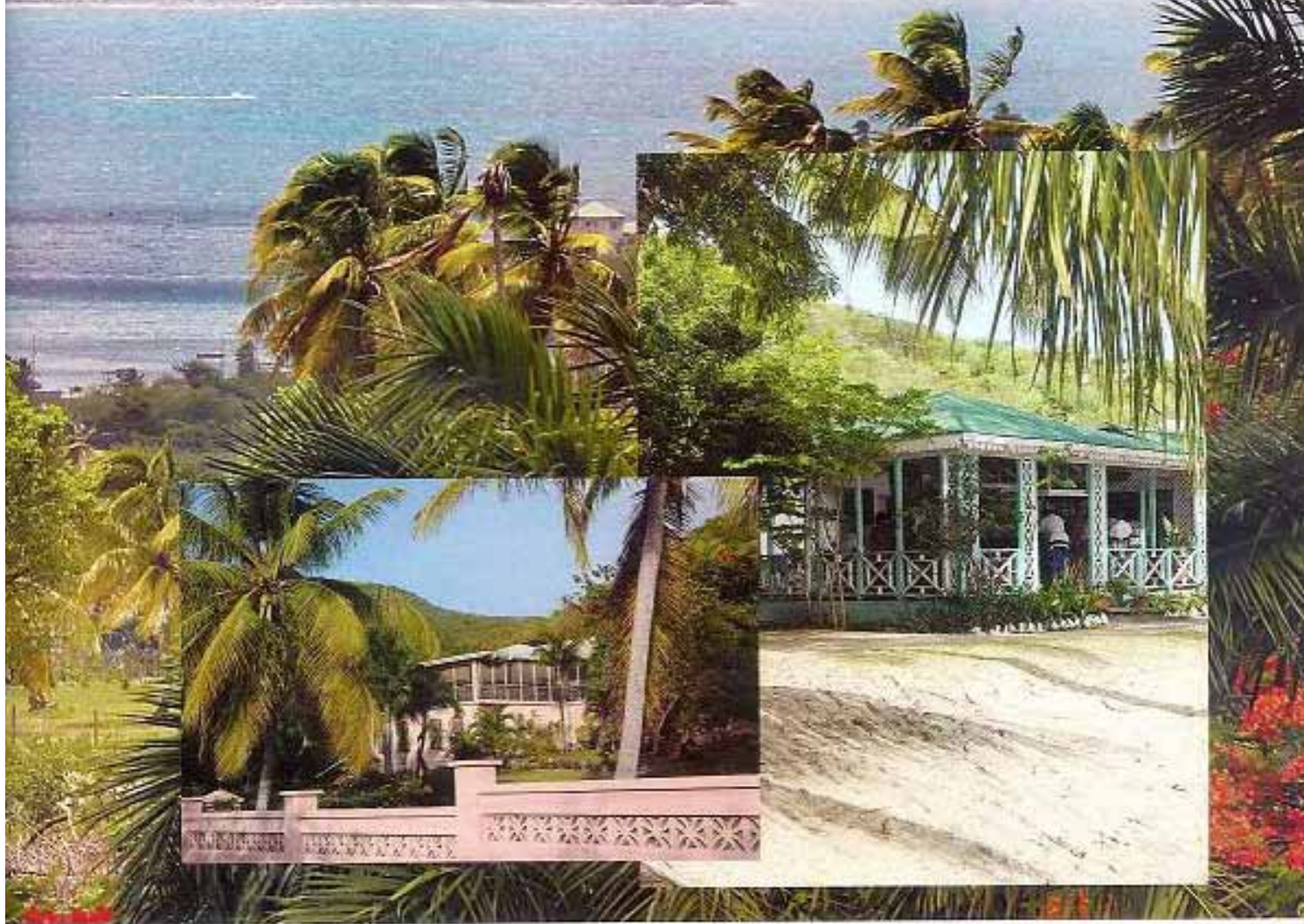
While the rest of the Caribbean parties hard, the tiny islet of Nevis remains a verdant oasis of calm, full of wonderful beaches, intimate haunts and blissfully low-key resorts.

BY AARON PEASLEY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY VENETIA DEARDEN

ESCAPE

PARADISE FOUND

The view across the channel from Nevis to St Kitts. Clockwise from bottom left: a beach bar, Sailing off Nevis. A pastel-pink home. The Oualie Beach Resort



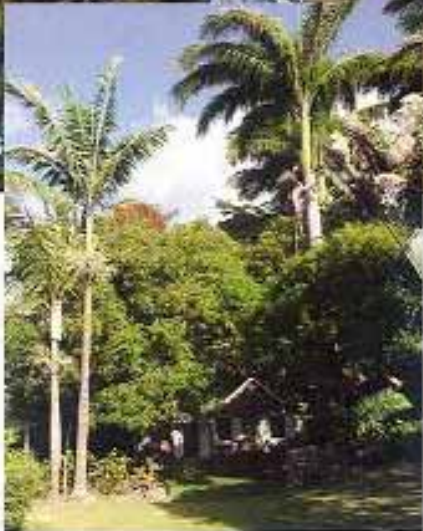
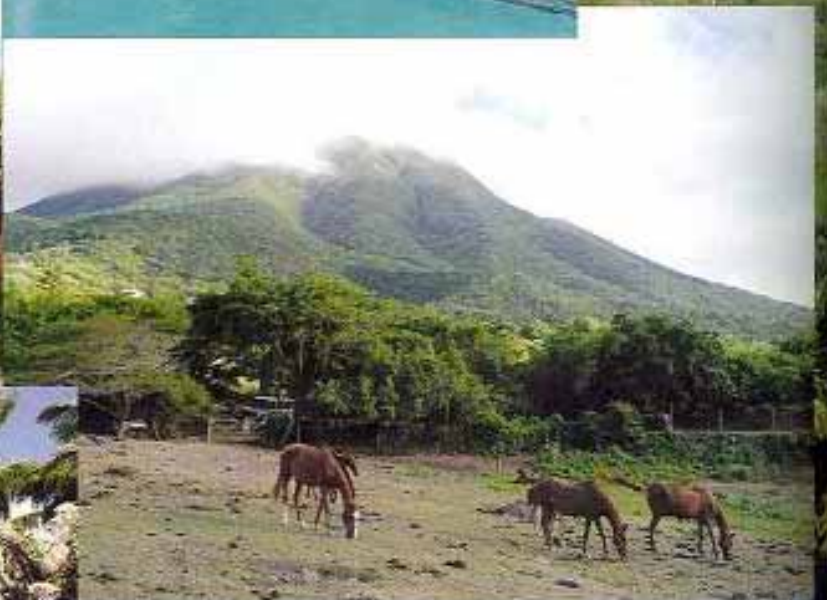
Arriving late at the Hermitage Plantation Inn, I feel as though if I've travelled back in time. Perched 800 feet above sea level, on the southern slopes of Nevis Peak, this place is a little cluster of pastel-coloured cottages lit like Christmas ornaments amid a lush landscape of mango, cashew, bougainvillea and breadfruit. Moonlight filters through the latticed verandah, throwing tiny diamonds of light across the room. With a soundtrack of chirping bell frogs, a light tropical breeze and the perfume of ginger flowers, I have all the ingredients for a perfect night's sleep. Until a series of loud thuds rattle my rooftop.

Over breakfast the next morning, I ask my gracious hosts and owners of the Hermitage Plantation Inn, the Lupinacci family, about the noise. It turns out the racket was the work of the cheeky green vervet monkeys, who like to toss mangoes and other tropical fruit into the darkness in the wee hours.

The tiny island of Nevis, adrift in the southernmost stretch of

the West Indies, home to only about 12,000, has long been a haven for those seeking quiet isolation. The Hermitage is one of a handful of Nevis' romantic plantation inns, all charmingly restored remnants of the island's history as a sugar-production capital in the 17th and 18th centuries. Back then, Nevis was the queen of the Caribbean, and great houses like the Hermitage were the residences of wealthy sugar barons. Almost all the plantation-style inns are high above the ocean, where cool breezes ease the hottest days.

What sets Nevis' plantation hotels apart from other Caribbean resorts is their sense of community and history. At weekends, the Hermitage's 340-year-old Great House, believed to be the Caribbean's oldest wooden structure, is the centre of the island's social life, as it was hundreds of years ago. Evenings are convivial, beginning with a rum punch at the bar, followed by dinner on the porch, where one eats four-course meals by flickering candlelight. Guests include relatives of the Lupinaccis, paying visitors (many of whom return year on year) and a motley crew of local characters.



COTTAGE INDUSTRY
 Clockwise from right: a clapboard cottage at the Hermitage Plantation Inn. Horses being prepared for riding. The pool at Mount Nevis Inn. Palm-trees. Boats at Pinney's Beach. The pier at Oualie Beach. The Hermitage's rescued thoroughbreds

local girl Fanny Nisbet there in 1787. The great house and 17 guest suites have recently been given a chic overhaul by the Hoffman family, who purchased the property in 2002. Life here is about doing very little, but doing it in style, whether eating in the candlelit sugar mill, or playing a spirited game of croquet on the hotel's green, which looks to the ocean 750 feet below.

Days in Nevis are composed of languorous stretches spent swimming in calm coral-filled waters, and dropping in for a rum punch at a low-key beach bar. One of the best beaches is Oualie Beach, or 'land of beautiful water'. It's dominated by the no-frills Oualie Beach Resort, where the Friday-night party comes as close to 'nightlife' as Nevis gets. By day, the beach is dominated by water sports, as well as being home to Barbara Whitman's Under the Sea, a sea-life conservation and education centre, where visitors can swim with Crush, Whitman's rescued hawksbill sea turtle.

Pinney's Beach, protected by a gorgeous reef, is a three-mile strip of powdery sand, half a mile from Nevis' sleepy capital. The best bar and restaurant on the beach is Sunshines, done up with wicker furniture, colourful flags and beaten-up number plates; it sells barbecued seafood spiced with fiery marinades. The bright

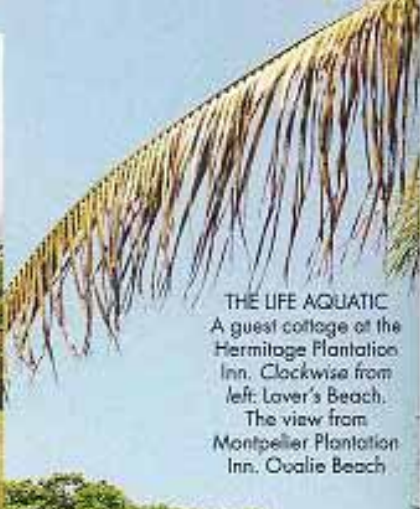
Eccentricity – British or otherwise – has definitely found a home in Nevis. The island has a wonderful cast of expat oddballs, including the Scottish beekeeper who taught the locals honey production. The best place to sample this renegade spirit (and the island's food) is at Miss June's Cuisine. 'Miss' June Mestier is a former Trinidadian beauty queen who serves cocktails and canapés in her antique-filled living room, followed by a five-course meal in the formal dining room, while telling tales of her colourful past.

Montpelier Plantation Inn is another charming lodging, and the choice of romantics ever since Admiral Lord Nelson married



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ESCAPE



THE LIFE AQUATIC
A guest cottage at the Hermitage Plantation Inn. Clockwise from left: Lover's Beach. The view from Montpelier Plantation Inn. Ovalie Beach



shack draws everyone from families staying at the Four Seasons to local Rastas and the odd famous person.

If you can ride, you must hack through the rainforest. At the Hermitage, the Lupinacci family keeps a large stable of rescued thoroughbreds. On my way back from riding down dirt roads, past abandoned windmills, and through narrow rocky paths beneath branches heavy with ripe tropical fruit, I come face to face with a playful vervet monkey – a reminder that in Nevis, nature is blissfully part of life.

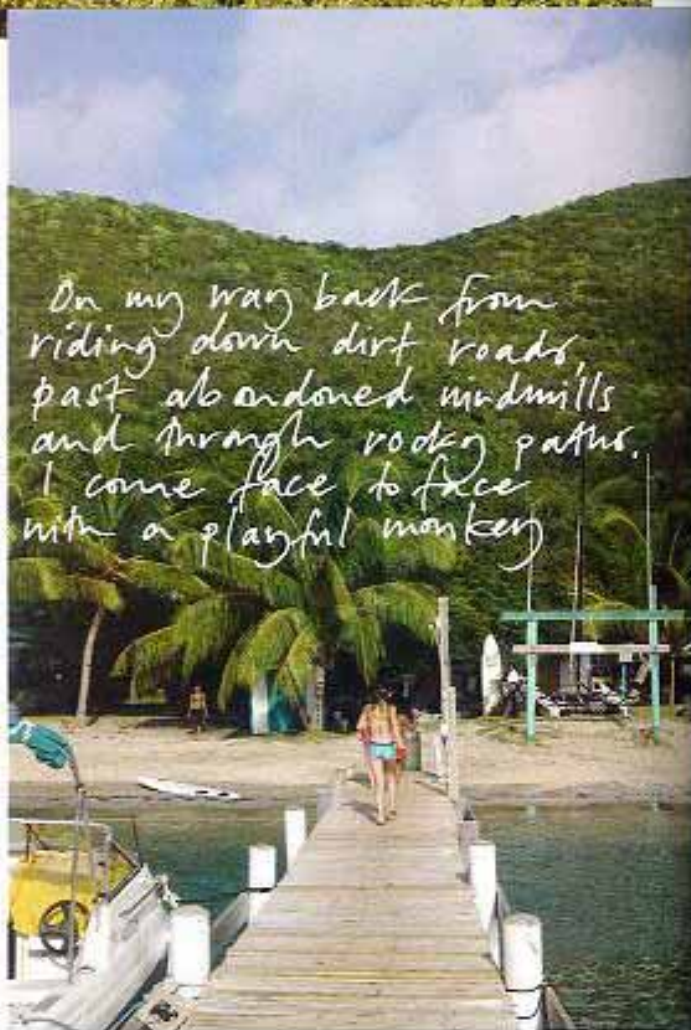
While there's no doubt that Nevis lures the wealthy, one would have to hunt rather hard to find any glitz or ostentation. The closest you'd come would be Four Seasons Resort Nevis, with its wealthy North American clientele. The Four Seasons will soon be out-luxed by a new Amanresort; it's not yet clear whether this arrival will change the quiet atmosphere of this magical outpost.

Genteel and cloistered, Nevis still feels like a secret, just 36 square miles of verdant hills, pristine beaches, underwater coral kingdoms and vast tropical rainforests. Certainly, no one comes here expecting designer boutiques or late-night beach parties. The truth is, Nevis doesn't feel much like the Caribbean at all. □

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

WHERE TO STAY: **The Hermitage Plantation Inn** (+869 469 3477; www.hermitagenevis.com), from about £120 a room a night B&B. **Montpelier Plantation Inn** (+869 469 3462; www.montpeliernevis.com), from about £200 a room a night B&B.

EATING AND DRINKING: **Miss June's Cuisine** (+869 469 5330). **Sunshines** (+869 469 5817; www.sunshinenevis.com).



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