

To set this tea, let your imagination run as wild as a tropical jungle. Picture yourself on an island. The pace is slow. The light is white and clear. The turquoise Caribbean gleams like a jewel, viewed from a white, sandy cove. Trade winds blow an afternoon breeze, rippling sugarcane fields, and one repairs to a verandah for a brief respite from the afternoon sun. Sharp beaked Banana-twits flit on and off the table looking for a handout. If you are sitting in the ruins of an old sugar mill, you watch iridescent hummingbirds sip nectar from the fuchsia-colored bougainvillea vines tumbling down the sides of the stone-coral building. A lizard darts away from the rhythmic footsteps of a waiter who carries a tray with teapots and a selection of tropical teatime fare. You feel luxurious, satiated by sun, temperate water, soothing bird calls, and the anticipation of an exotic and relaxing afternoon meal.

To create the complete atmosphere of this sensuous experience, you have no need to hop on a jet heading toward the equator. Your own home can be transformed into a tropical haven. Set your tea outdoors, or in a glassed-in porch or room full of greenery. Tall, potted bamboo, avocado or palm trees should be surrounding the wicker or rattan table and chairs. Blossoming orange, lemon, or gardenia plants should scent the air. Creeping vines of ivy, spider plants, or asparagus ferns can twist around centerpieces of oversized floral bouquets spiked with birds of paradise. You can also use a hollowed watermelon brimming with tropical fruits for color, or

scatter hollowed coconut shells with candles for soft light. Color is the key to decorating. Hanging bougainvillea vines are imitated by folding hot pink, green, orange, and yellow tissue paper on a string. Place a blue-green cotton cloth on the table, and cover that with a sea island batik print or use bamboo mats. Deep blue or lush green napkins can be pleated and tucked into tortoiseshell rings. At each corner of the table fill large scallop shells with sand so that the grains just spill onto the table, or prop the delicate fan coral in a bowl with small purple and pink angel wing shells. The elements are simple: use earthenware glazed in bright colors with geometric patterns, or stark white china plates to recreate the effect of the brilliant light and white-washed walls one finds in island homes. Bone-handled flatware and ceramic teapots are best. Gently whirling ceiling fans will blow trade-wind-like breezes, or hammocks and gauzed netting can be hung above the table for a dramatic touch. If you know of a friendly parrot who would keep a watchful eye on the festivities (perhaps with a running, squawking commentary), by all means pull out a bird stand. Otherwise, use prints that feature feather patterns or exotic flowers and sea shells. Play recordings of steel drums, reggae, or calypso music to echo the pulsating beat of the colorful setting.

The food should be colorful and spicy, and should reflect the abundance of fruit in the tropical trees, and fish along the tropical shores. In a wicker basket you can offer a sampling of breads made of banana,