

A paradise to die for

Its highlands bring Scotland to mind but this coral utopia is a world apart. By **Richard Powell**

The strange outsider in a club of tropical islands that span a glorious arc stretching from Venezuela to Florida, Barbados is immediately set apart from its volcanic neighbours for a remarkable reason: it is formed entirely of coral.

From the gullies of the highland hills that the first British settlers, in the early 1600s, dubbed "Scotland" to the uneven paths that lead to its picture postcard beaches, I cannot help but marvel at this breathtakingly beautiful island.

Dig beneath its rich topsoil or look closely at a cliff face or at the bricks of any colonial pile and you will discover a floor of coral bound together and frozen in time. To stand on a country that itself used to be alive feels unlike being anywhere else on earth.

For me, this is the first revelation I experience after arriving in Barbados, but by no means the last. Like a teenager, within an hour of arriving in the capital Bridgetown and transferring to my boutique hotel on the fashionable west coast, I am splashing about in the balmy North Atlantic. Ducking as a bird narrowly swoops over me and inexplicably crashes into the sea without reappearing, I search the crystal-clear water for it, only to find what appears to be a feisty young swordfish. Later that evening, on my first of many outings to a pulsating strip of bars called the St Lawrence Gap, an amused waiter explains I have witnessed a flying fish, and promptly serves up the first of dozens of this mouth-watering national delicacy, fried and set in a bap

with fresh salad and chilli sauce.

"These ones just came in," he says. "Perhaps this was the one you saw."

Barbadians, or Bajans as they are also known, are famed for their upbeat character, and who wouldn't be when you live on an island free from the poisonous critters, high crime rate and undrinkable water its neighbours suffer. It is also usually spared the region's devastating hurricanes, which generally pass by as if it was protected by an invisible force field.

With so many things going for it, and its Commonwealth status, it's not hard to see why Britons come here in their hundreds of thousands every year to escape the winter back home, or to enjoy peace and quiet in this, the low and rainy season. Rarely falling for more than an hour a day during my stay, the showers offer a welcome

break from the harsh rays of the midday sun which, a local tells me, forces even black-skinned Bajans to "cream up" to avoid sunburn.

Fittingly, it rains as our 4x4 Island Safari jeep enters the Scottish District on the island's east coast and we steal glances at majestic Mount Hillaby, which is also home to a small Rastafarian museum – the movement was introduced to Barbados in 1975 from Jamaica.

The district's Unesco World Heritage site shares many characteristics with Scotland, including oil reserves off its coast and dense forests where cattle, and sheep that look more like goats, graze on the lush grass. Unlike the homeland of the first Scottish settlers who named the district, its humid, sun-soaked climate means

mango, banana and avocado trees dot the landscape, brimming with fruit, and its naturally purified water seeps through mile after mile of porous coral gullies, rather than sandstone.

Back at my hotel, The House, attentive "ambassadors" – a combination of receptionist, waiter and concierge – ask about every detail of my day. Perhaps they see how I can hardly stop smiling at the few hours I have enjoyed here. This is a place that transforms moods, and it isn't long before I am leafing through The Nation newspaper, checking out the property section and mulling over who might lend me £125k-odd for a little two-bedroom pied-a-terre somewhere inland. A Euromillions rollover win would buy a modest mansion here in the Sandy Lane district next to the hotel, with California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sir Cliff Richard for neighbours. I wonder whether the Peter Pan of Pop gets up and sings when the cricket at the capital's Kensington Oval gets rained off...

Nestled between my upmarket hotel for couples and the more affordable family hotel Tamarind Cove is the famous Italian restaurant of the rich and famous, Daphne's. Counting Simon Cowell, Mariah Carey and Tony Blair as patrons as well as the cream of the OK! crowd in high season (December, January), the food rivals that of its London parent of the same name.

The starter of marinated fish carpaccio of the day, with delicious swordfish served with avocado and tomato along with squid frito misto on rocket, is just a taster of the delights to come – not least because it is the first squid I've ever eaten that melts in the mouth as opposed to sticking in the gullet like a ball of rubber bands.

The restaurant's manager has shrewdly addressed the credit crunch by producing a menu which provides a set dining experience so you know exactly what you'll be paying (two courses BBD\$110 (about £38), three courses including dessert for BBD\$130bb, roughly £40).

Their celebrity chef, Marco Festini Cromer, sends out a broad range of tasters, including the shrimp and zucchini, beef carpaccio with fried goat's cheese, olives and stuffed peppers and the buffalo mozzarella ravioli with vegetables and pepper sauce.

For me, the highlight is the main of red snapper, skillfully removed from the thick blanket of salt it has been roasted in and prepared in front of me. It couldn't have been fresher if I'd speared it myself and is quite simply divine.

Other top dishes on the island can be found at The Tides, run by Coventry-born chef Guy Beasley in the plush neighbouring Holetown, where the lobster tail has me leafing once more

through the newspaper's property section.

Bridgetown, on the vibrant south coast, is still home to the harbour that for so long acted as the hub of the Caribbean's trade and export market. Thankfully, it has swapped its tall ships full of slaves for big-spending visitors who arrive on luxury cruise-liners and opulent yachts, though the super-rich have in recent years spurned these in favour of anchoring offshore and

reaching the mainland via private submarine. Not to be outdone, despite my rather more modest budget, I opt for a group submarine ride to a shipwreck just off the south east coast favoured by surfers the world over because of its enormous waves.

Atlantis operates one-hour tours to Clarke's Bank off the West coast, taking 48 passengers 130 feet below the surface to see its 40,000-year-old coral reef for BBD\$200 – around £60. If you prefer to get wet, Barbados Blue at the Hilton will take you snorkelling with the turtles: or for the more adventurous, deep sea diving at a wreck in Carlisle Bay – if you can first show them you can use their diving equipment in a swimming pool (even if, like me, you've never tried it before). Within a couple of hours I was lying on the bottom of the ocean blissfully watching the sun flickering on the surface above, gliding through schools of vibrantly coloured fish and chasing huge green sea turtles around a sunken Second World War ship which has been taken over by coral.

Back on land, I opt for an afternoon tour of bohemian Speightstown, the second largest town on the island. Having been renovated in recent years, it is now a fascinating tribute to the country's colonial past, with some beautiful original buildings and the world's best collection of 17th-century English iron cannon pointing out to sea.

They were last fired when Oliver Cromwell sent battleships to Barbados to quell insurrection by planters and settlers in 1649.

Late in the afternoon we see a truly breathtaking sunset behind the pier off Queen Street and watch a group of ospreys circling above the golden waters before spectacularly dive-bombing onto their hapless quarry.

The evening sees an essential visit to Oistins Bay for its Friday Fish Fry – which resembles more of an open roof nightclub for Bajans and visitors alike as opposed to the rather exclusively expat clientele of the island's most prestigious nightclub, Harbour Lights. Teenagers compete to 'serve' each other by break-dancing and shaking down onlookers for their change, while older residents seeking a slightly slower pace waltz the night away, all surrounded by the haze of fishy smoke from the plethora of shack kitchens cooking up the day's catch. The free-for-all nature of the place makes it a people-watching heaven, where you can sit back with a cold bottle of Banks beer – the delectable local tippie, if you've had your fill of rum punch – and soak up the abundant colour. ■



A Rastafarian museum sits atop Mount Hillaby, Barbados' highest peak, situated in the Scottish District of the island

PHOTOGRAPH: WALTER BIBIKOW/PHOTOLIBRARY.COM

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TRAVEL NOTES

GETTING THERE AND WHERE TO STAY

Virgin Holidays has seven nights in Barbados from £999 per person based on two adults sharing a standard room. Price includes return flights from London Gatwick to Barbados

and accommodation at the four-star Tamarind Cove with breakfast and transfers. Virgin Holidays also has seven nights in Barbados from £1,396 per person based on two adults sharing a standard room. Price includes return flights from

Gatwick to Barbados and accommodation at the five-star The House with breakfast and transfers. Visit www.virginholidays.co.uk or call 0844 557 3860. Easyjet has return flights from Glasgow and Edinburgh to

Gatwick from £30pp. Visit www.easyjet.com.

OTHER INFO

For more information about Elegant Hotels, visit www.elegant-hotels.com. For further details about Barbados, visit www.visitbarbados.org.