

## Barbados: The best of the West Indies?

Its beaches aren't the greatest in the Caribbean, and it has no rainforest or virgin coral reef. So what's the draw in Barbados? Adriaane Pielou has the answer.

By Adriaane Pielou

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"Police here in Barbados are very, very strict. Wrongdoers get no mercy!" chortles the minibus driver as we cross the island from airport to hotel. "Prison here is kill or cure. Usually kills you, ha ha! But if you do get out you won't want to go back in again! And that's the way we like it!"

Holidaying probably isn't quite as risk-free in Barbados as it is at Parrot Cay in the Turks and Caicos, the private resort where Bruce Willis and Donna Karan have houses and which the billionaire owner, Christina Ong, guards with 150 Gurkhas. Barbados is a lot less expensive, though. It also has one of the lowest rates of crime in the Caribbean. Even though most crime in the region is among local drug dealers, that's a reassuring consideration after the lethal shooting of the newly-weds in Antigua last month.



Barbados has one of the lowest rates of crime in the Caribbean Photo: Getty

"What keeps Barbados law-abiding? Education, education, education," says Claire Jordan, an earnest young hotel sales manager over breakfast by the beach. "The first thing our government did after independence in 1966 was to introduce free schooling. Anyone who gets straight As at A-level can go to university anywhere in the world and have the government pay for everything."

She herself went to Heriot-Watt in Edinburgh, then to an école supérieure in France, while her brother went to Harvard. "So everyone's educated, employment rates are high — and in general that means very little poverty and very low crime. What crime does exist is often committed by other islanders coming here under the new policy in the Caribbean that lets anyone move anywhere, as in the EU."

Whatever its effect on crime, the high standard of education certainly seems to have endowed Bajans across the social spectrum with a marked level of self-confidence and self-expression. My stay was punctuated with one friendly exchange after another. "Madam, I see you prefer silver to gold, too," comments an almost toothless road-sweeper in Holetown, putting down her brush to shake a skinny wrist bearing a bracelet, then pointing to my bangles.

"We both like pearls, too," I say, indicating her earrings.

"Oh, yes, so flatterin' for the skin, dark or light," she smiles, resuming her sweeping.

Getting into a taxi outside Mullins Beach Club, on the west coast, I watch as the two uniformed beach attendants who have called the cab suddenly scream with laughter, recognising the driver. “You’ve got a celebrity at the wheel! Mr Bodyguard to the Stars!” one calls out. Modestly, the muscular young Bajan at the wheel admits he mixes taxi-driving with working as a bodyguard for visiting celebrities.

“I looked after Tiger Woods when he got married here, the Versace family, lots of em,” he says, shifting his bulk behind the wheel. “Good work and nice. Sunglasses on day an’ night!” And in hotel spas the therapists are enjoyably forthcoming about everything from spoilt rich clients — “I had one woman on her phone yelling at someone in New York while I massaged her!” — to the problem of job monkeys: “If you throw something at them for taking fruit from your garden they’ll shake every piece of fruit from the tree, leave it on the ground and just give you this bad look. It’s as if to say, don’t mess with us, OK?”

Barbados has its drawbacks, of course. The island is just 21 miles long by 14, and although green fields of sugarcane and cotton still run for miles inland, it has become very built-up along the south and south-west coasts. There are some ugly new buildings going up, such as the ludicrous The Sands condominiums, which look like a high-rise White House, utterly out of place. And, with a few exceptions, the beaches are nothing special.

The loveliest are the great deserted stretches on the Atlantic side of the island, the wild east coast, but there’s a reason this stretch remains undeveloped: the currents are frightening. The best beach is on the south coast, below the Crane Beach Hotel, where a lift takes you down the cliffside to the most glorious bay of pale, firm, surf-slapped sand. On the west coast, though, where most of the hotels are located, the beaches are mostly little more than a narrow strip of sand.

Although the dollar exchange rate works well in our favour, local prices have risen markedly since I last came, six years ago. In restaurants, the catch of the day is routinely about £15 a head now, for instance. “Even coconut water sold at the side of the road is \$16 now [about £4]. It was half that five years ago,” sighs another taxi-driver. “I don’t know what the world’s comin’ to.”

But the pluses far outweigh the minuses. The people are a joy. There are excellent places to stay. Food can be sensational (hugely improved, recently). There is much more to do than elsewhere in the Caribbean. Really good supermarkets make it easy to self-cater. Everything works. And if you’re looking for somewhere to go for an autumn holiday, the coming months are also when you find the lowest prices of the year.

The reason is that it’s hurricane season, when prices fall throughout the islands. Being so southerly and on the very eastern edge of the Caribbean, however, Barbados is rarely affected by anything more than the odd storm and rain at this time of year. The last hurricane hit it in 1955.

## TEN ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES IN BARBADOS

1. Have a drink at **Groots**, outside Holetown. Barbados’s Cheers, run by a Liverpoolian; regulars start taking their seats at about 6pm.
2. Have lunch by the sea at **The Tides**, Holetown. The chef, Guy Beasley, makes sensational seafood and rich puddings. About £40 a head without wine (432 8356, [www.tidesbarbados.com](http://www.tidesbarbados.com) (<http://www.tidesbarbados.com>)). Note: The international dialling code for the island is 001 246.
3. Have dinner on the west coast at **The Cliff** (432 1922, [www.thecliffbarbados.com](http://www.thecliffbarbados.com) (<http://www.thecliffbarbados.com>)). Spectacular by night, and Paul Owens’ sauces are world-class. About £50 a head for three courses, excluding wine.
4. Eat sushi overlooking the sea from the rooftop restaurant at **Little Arches**, one of the new hotels on the south coast (420 4689, [www.littlearches.com](http://www.littlearches.com) (<http://www.littlearches.com>)).
5. Watch the entrancing black-and-white film of plantation life shot in 1935 at **St Nicholas Abbey** (422 8725, [www.stnicholasabbey.com](http://www.stnicholasabbey.com) (<http://www.stnicholasabbey.com>)).

6. Cruise along the coast on one of the **Silver Moon catamarans** (438 2088, [www.silvermoonbarbados.com](http://www.silvermoonbarbados.com) (<http://www.silvermoonbarbados.com>)). These South African-built craft are by far the smartest, with 12 on board for group trips rather than the 40 often squeezed on other boats. About £140 an hour for private charter .
7. Tour the new **George Washington House museum** (228 5461, [www.georgewashingtonbarbados.org](http://www.georgewashingtonbarbados.org) (<http://www.georgewashingtonbarbados.org>)), near the Barbados Museum in Bridgetown, with Adrian Loveridge, an entertaining and knowledgeable volunteer guide.
8. Stay at **Cobblers Cove** (422 2291 [www.cobblerscove.com](http://www.cobblerscove.com) (<http://www.cobblerscove.com>)) for a taste of the old, genteel Barbados. Quiet and delectably old-fashioned, it's also a very comfortable, convenient, well-thought-out hotel. The two-storey blocks of 40 suites, none more than a minute's walk from the beach, open on to a central little garden. In the beach-front restaurant, food is good to very good, service slow to very slow but charming — one venerable waiter could have stepped straight out of Rick's in Casablanca. It has free internet access, a good masseuse, Marisa, on site and an outstandingly well-stocked library.
9. Self-cater, at the new apartments at **Little Good Harbour** (439 3000, [www.littlegoodharbourbarbados.com](http://www.littlegoodharbourbarbados.com) (<http://www.littlegoodharbourbarbados.com>)), opposite the Fish Pot restaurant (same owner). Built on a hillside with two elegant pools on the quiet north-west coast (too quiet and remote for some, though), the apartments are outstanding, with four-poster beds, big twin-basin bathrooms, brilliantly equipped large kitchens and large terraces set with sofa and dining table. Buy fresh fish from a local fisherman's stall and shop at the excellent supermarket in Warren.
10. For glamour and fun, check into **Sandy Lane** (444 2000, [www.sandylane.com](http://www.sandylane.com) (<http://www.sandylane.com>)). Its pink marble floors are so slippery it's amazing they're not constantly delivering guests to the local hospital with snapped off arms and legs. But, insane choice of flooring apart, this is a glorious hotel. Yards from a lovely beach, with a big, breezy, always much cooler pool area, really good children's and teen's club (pool tables, old jukebox, computers, etc), famously great golf (three courses) and beautifully designed, very efficient spa, it really has everything anyone could want for a luxurious week in the sunshine.

The 112 rooms are much more international than Caribbean, but big and comfortable, with a wonderfully lavish bathroom and a large terrace. The food is good to excellent. And in comparison to Christmas, when you have to book for two weeks and even standard rooms are a stratospheric £2,000 a night, rates at this time of year are almost a bargain.

"Grand, grand hotel. I'm surprised the Queen don't come," said the taxi driver on the way back to the airport.

- Until mid-December ITC Classics holidays (01244 355 400, [www.itcclassics.co.uk](http://www.itcclassics.co.uk) (<http://www.itcclassics.co.uk>)) has the following seven-night packages in Barbados, with economy flights on BA from London: at Cobblers Cove, from £1,455 per person with breakfast; at Little Good Harbour, from £1,140pp, sharing a one-bedroom suite, room only, with welcome champagne and goodies and a day out on the Cool Runnings catamaran; at Sandy Lane, from £2,399 pp, sharing an Orchid room, with breakfast and four rounds of golf or US\$200 in resort spa vouchers. ITC's concierges can arrange trips and excursions and extras.

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