

From The Sunday Times

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Stars love it — and so will you

Barbados has been attracting winter visitors for more than 50 years, says James Henderson

The man in the van in front is having terrible trouble with kangaroo petrol. His van is bouncing up and down. But then I notice that the bounce has a rhythm to it. The vehicle's an automatic and he's using his brake as a bass drum pedal. Only in the Caribbean . . . Barbados, which is just 21 miles by 14, is the ideal place for a first-time visit to the Caribbean. It's quite crowded but it has been attracting winter visitors for half a century. Whole sectors of Britain's aristocracy used to decamp here each February to avoid the miserable weather back home. Nowadays the west coast is famous as the winter bolthole of an array of celebrities. Just to name a few Mels: Mel Smith has a house there. Mel Gibson has nearly caused crashes just by driving down the west coast main road — so many people stop and stare. And probably Mels B and C. Victoria Beckham has visited, as have the Blairs.

It should be no surprise, then, to discover that the west coast has some of the Caribbean's smartest hotels and restaurants. Some rooms cost more than £540 a night. Eating out comes at London prices.

Traditionally the Caribbean has not been known for its food, but this has changed over the past few years and now you can expect to eat pretty well in Barbados. The Cliff, La Mer, Calabaza, Tides, Daphne's (sister restaurant of Daphne's of London) and the Fish Pot are all doing a good job. They each have a lovely setting on the water, some cut into the cliffs, others overlooking the beach or a lagoon.

But you don't have to have a spare £90,000 to drop on a holiday, like Michael Winner, who takes his Christmas break in Barbados. There are reasonably priced places to stay on the west coast, and the south coast is cheaper, with a younger, livelier feel. The areas of Hastings, Worthing and Dover are not nearly as demure as their names might imply. At St Lawrence Gap, where the bars and clubs stand shoulder to shoulder, it gets pretty wild and steamy.

The beaches also change as you head around Barbados. On the west coast the sea, protected from the Atlantic by the island itself, is generally calm, but as you head around to the south the wind and waves build up, and the sports with them. Approaching the southern tip of the island you will see windsurfers (and a growing number of kite-surfers) scooting back and forth at Oistins and Silver Sands.

Just beyond, in the southeast, are some of the loveliest beaches of all. Crane Beach, Bottom Bay and Harrismith Beach are incredibly pretty stretches of sand cut into coral limestone cliffs, set on a surreally blue sea. They are popular with the Bajans for their weekend picnics and the waves are large enough to take out a boogie board. If you want to surf properly then you can do it on the dramatic east coast, where huge free-standing rocks look poised to crash down on the sand.

The Bajans themselves are easygoing and gracious (Barbados Tourist Authority, 020 7636 9448; www.barbados.org). You can stop literally anywhere, in the local rum bar or at a cricket match, and they'll give you the time of day, and probably a drink too.

On the south coast, it is well worth dropping in on the evening fish fry in the fishing town of Oistins, best late in the week. By night you can buy codfish balls, battered tropical fish and chips and a Banks Beer at a series of open-air stalls. A word of warning: watch the firebrand hot pepper sauce.

Music — apart from the crashing of waves — is not necessarily a part of the evening. But there are other entertainments, including chat about Bajan life, love, and the upcoming England cricket tour in April.

Tropical Places (0800 316 5125, www.tropicalplaces.co.uk), specialist in holidays to the Caribbean, Far East, Africa and Indian Ocean, has seven nights at the three-star Coconut Court near Hastings (room only) from £629 between Sept 1-Oct 8 oBarbados Tourist Authority, 020 7636 9448; www.barbados.org

WINTER SUN

The Jumeirah Beach Hotel in Dubai is set beside a white sandy beach: £989pp (Jan 25- Feb 7) to £1,159pp (Feb 8- Mar 31) for five nights' b&b, including flights and transfers (Tropical Places, 0800 316 5125; www.tropicalplaces.co.uk)

Les Terraces d'Essaouira is tucked away among the blue-and-white architecture of the Moroccan resort of Essaouira, a 10-minute walk from the beach: £505pp (Sept 2-Oct 20) to £580pp (Feb 12-25) for three nights' B&B in a standard room, including scheduled flights and transfers (Simply Travel, 020 8541 2211; www.simplytravel.com) o

Malaysia has spectacular beaches and a tropical climate. Five nights at the Berjaya Langkawi Beach & Spa Resort from £699pp (May 1-June 30) to £1,029pp (Dec 18-24), room only, including flights and transfers (Tropical Places, 0800 316 5125; www.tropicalplaces.co.uk).

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