

Barbados: the platinum and the tin

Barbados is too developed to have retained any charm, or at least that's the preconception. Paul Mansfield heads to the Caribbean's best-known destination to discover the truth.

Paul Mansfield

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Sunday lunch at the Hotel Atlantis and all is well with the world. The sun pours down, a breeze blows in off the ocean and the food is a Caribbean feast. Pork belly, fresh flying fish, pepper pot (sometimes called callaloo), plantain, cou-cou pudding... By the time the rum cake arrives, I feel like pounding my chest with pleasure. And the funny thing is, this is Barbados.

I had never wanted to visit Barbados: too posh and yet too tacky. Michael Winner and lottery winners on the same island? No thanks. I like my Caribbean casual and quirky - in its natural state. But then circumstances allowed a few days in Barbados in transit. Worth a quick look, surely?



Photo: Getty

First impressions were not good. The drive from the airport along the "platinum coast" - the name in itself enough to put anyone off - was a traffic-clogged crawl past one luxury hotel after another, crammed together in a jumble of questionable taste and high prices. The road itself was lined with fast-food joints and souvenir shops. Again: no thanks.

But then I reached Speightstown. This little west coast town marked the sudden end of mass development: an old-fashioned, ramshackle place with a few colonial buildings, market stalls lining the streets and a laid-back but lively feel.

At the Fisherman's Pub on Queen Street, a few old boys were sitting outside watching the world go by, and the interior was busy with diners. You ordered from the counter by the door - roast chicken with peas and rice cost £3 - then sat on the wooden deck with a Banks beer, watching the waves crashing in. At the next table was a burly man who sang along to the radio, and a substantial traffic warden, totting up her tickets. This was more like it.

Equally so a few miles up the road at Little Good Harbour. At this family-run hotel my room looked out over a palm grove, a corrugated iron fence and a boat up on blocks. Beyond that the sea glittered through the trees. At dinner there was fresh snapper on the menu and advice from the Bajan-Australian owners to kick back with a glass of Chardonnay. Good idea. And why stop at one?

Heading inland on empty roads, it was clear that the north and east are a very different kind of Barbados. Sugar cane waved in the breeze. The landscape was dotted with tiny villages, some prosperous, others scrappy. Deep-green valleys were reminiscent of parts of Wales, but actually called "Scotland". Then, at a road junction so steep and crazily

angled that driving along it felt a bit like banking in a plane, I swooped down to the east coast itself, the town of Bathsheba and the Atlantis Hotel.

The Atlantis is a Barbadian institution. It was built in the 1880s as a resort hotel for the new Barbados railway from Bridgetown. Guests from as far away as British Guyana would arrive by train to take the therapeutic Atlantic air. In the hotel dining room old photographs show straw-boated men and crinolined women ascending the steps of what was then one of the grandest hotels on the island. The railway closed in 1937 and the Atlantis fell slowly into disrepair, its white walls peeling and discoloured, its interior dull and dated. Since 2001 it has been managed by Theodore Williams, a retired Bajan hotelier, who has made some improvements and plans to restore it completely.

Mr Williams keeps just seven rooms open - one of them rented permanently to George Lamming, the octogenarian Barbadian writer whose novel *In the Castle of My Skin* is a Caribbean classic. But Mr Williams was aware that the Atlantis was not to everyone's taste, and had - very graciously - booked me into a guesthouse nearby. We had lunch instead.

Which is how I came to be sitting down with Mr Williams and his delightful family for an ABC (All Bajan Cuisine) buffet. The place was packed and many people stopped by to say hello. There were local families, "returnee" immigrants from Britain, hand-holding couples, young children, a few curious tourists. All of Barbados was here it seemed, on equal terms and enjoying each other's company. "It's a chance for visitors to interact with our community," said Mr Williams. "Sadly, there aren't that many."

My guesthouse was the Sea-U, just up the hill. Simple wooden buildings with verandas were set in a palm grove above the sea. There was an honesty bar, a homely little restaurant and spectacular views down to Bathsheba. The village itself was little more than a strip of wooden buildings facing the beach. The surf pounded in (the east coast is great for surfing, less so for swimming); locals exchanged lazy greetings; the odd tourist bus rumbled by but didn't linger. Perfect.

The coastline here is dotted with tiny coves, where giant slabs of rock contain pools and caves. I walked the route of the old railway from the Atlantis Hotel to Bath and picnicked in the shade of the coco palms. Inland, there were ruined sugar mills and old stone churches to explore. I spent a glorious afternoon in the cool green recesses of the Andromeda Botanical Gardens, the island's finest. And at the Sea-U I lolled in a hammock and chatted to the other guests. The days rolled by like a song.

On my last night, a group of us drifted down to the village for drinks. We ended up in a local bar where a karaoke session was just beginning. Karaoke! Even here, it seemed, there was no escape from tourist madness... But this was a Caribbean karaoke session, with the music taken seriously - the men sounded like Percy Sledge and the women like Mariah Carey. Well, some of them.

We sang and chatted, putting away copious amounts of Mount Gay Rum, locals and tourists alike out on the dance floor. The hours flew by.

I won't say I completely changed my mind, but clearly there was more to this island than meets the eye. Two in the morning in Barbados, and all was well with the world.

BARBADOS ESSENTIALS

Getting there

Paul Mansfield travelled to Barbados with XL Airways (0871 911 4220, www.xl.com (<http://www.xl.com>)), which flies twice a week from Gatwick to Bridgetown. Return tickets from £331; XL One Business Class from £764.

Where to stay

The dialling code from Britain is 001 246. All prices are for a double room with breakfast.

Atlantis Hotel, Tent Bay, Bathsheba (433 9445, www.atlantisbarbados.com (<http://www.atlantisbarbados.com>)) In need of some restoration, but clean and hugely atmospheric; £55.

Sea-U Guest House, Bathsheba (433 9450, www.seaubarbados.com (<http://www.seaubarbados.com>)) The best accommodation on the east coast. A modern house built in traditional island style in tropical gardens; £68.

Little Good Harbour, Shermans (439 3000, www.littlegoodharbourbarbados.com (<http://www.littlegoodharbourbarbados.com>)) Very smart and stylish suites of between one and three bedrooms; two swimming pools and an excellent restaurant (see below); £195 room only.

Where to eat and drink

Prices for two with drinks. Check opening times.

The lunchtime buffet at the Atlantis Hotel (Wednesdays £11, Sundays £12; reservations 433 9445) is a Barbados institution.

Dina's in Bathsheba (433 9726) is a funky place with a waterfront terrace serving good Bajan cuisine; £20.

The Round House Inn, Bathsheba (433 9678), is a landmark 19th-century building overlooking the beach. It offers Bajan cuisine with a modern twist – try the flying fish pâté; £35.

Naniki (433 1300) is a stylish restaurant in the peaceful hills behind Bathsheba; £30.

The Fish Pot restaurant, Little Good Harbour (439 2604), offers informal first-class dining at the water's edge; £70.

The Fisherman's Pub, Speightstown (422 2703), is a local favourite, live music Wednesday; £10.

What to do

Explore the rugged east coast on foot. The "Soup Bowl" at Bathsheba is a famous surfing spot; Bath is one of the best places to swim.

The Andromeda Botanical Gardens, Bathsheba, daily 9am-5pm, £4.50.

Codrington College, Sealy Hall (www.codrington.org (<http://www.codrington.org>)), Mon-Sat, free, is a graceful 18th-century building that was the first university in the British West Indies.

St John's Parish Church, Glebe Land, daily, free, is an atmospheric 16th-century church whose ancient graveyard has sweeping views across the island.

Also within easy driving distance are the Barbados Wildlife Reserve, St Nicholas Abbey, Farley Hill National Park, Morgan Lewis Sugar Mill and Grenade Hall Signal Station.

Guidebook

Barbados Directions (Rough Guides, £6.99). In the Castle of My Skin by George Lamming is available for £8.36 from www.amazon.co.uk (<http://www.amazon.co.uk>)

Further information

Barbados Tourism Authority (020 7636 9448, www.visitbarbados.co.uk (<http://www.visitbarbados.co.uk>))

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