

# A Bajan *love affair*

Barbados is a perennial favourite with plenty new to tempt the British market

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**T**he view from the second floor of George Washington House seems at first glance unremarkable. Barbados is an island where views can be pretty stunning, from the calm, palm-fringed azure shallows of the 'platinum' west coast right over to the wave-battered, boulder-strewn surf beaches on the east.


But the unimposing vista from this Bridgetown museum - peer

through the trees and past a few modern houses and you can make out the inviting curve of Carlisle Bay - is perhaps the most important on the island. This view changed the course of history.

Because while staying in this very house at the tender age of 19, George Washington looked down to Carlisle Bay, then full to the brim with trading ships, and realised how important Barbados

and the whole Caribbean was financially to the British. And so, 30 years later when he was the first president of the US, when he wanted to divert British forces away from America during the

War of Independence, he decided by far the best method would be to persuade the French to threaten our hold on the West Indies. They did, we were side-tracked, and the US won the war.

The British love affair with Barbados may have begun with trade, but these days our undimmed affections are for its sun, sea and sand. Although the island gained independence 



PICTURES: BARBADOS TOURISM MARKETING

→ in 1966 – this year’s 50th anniversary celebrations in November should be something to see – we still have a special relationship with the island. Last year, nearly 187,000 tourists visited from the UK, an 11% increase on the year before.

Balmy sunshine and swaying palm trees explain some of our affection, but these apply across the Caribbean. What makes Barbados especially appealing – and explains not only the high number of UK visitors but also the committed core of regulars who return year after year – is its variety. Though merely medium-sized in Caribbean island terms, it punches above its weight in catering to a range of different clients when it comes to both accommodation and attractions.

## ▶ NATURAL BEAUTY

One of the best ways to view Barbados’s most mainstream attractions is to take a catamaran cruise along its beautiful west coast, nicknamed ‘platinum’ in a nod not just to the fine white sand but also to the wealth of the clientele at its luxury properties, including the infamous celeb-haunt Sandy Lane. Sailing past picture-perfect palms and stopping off for snorkelling and swimming reminds clients exactly what the Caribbean does best.



**The coast’s ‘platinum’ nickname is a nod not just to the white sand but also to the wealth of the clientele**

Options range from the raucous – think Black Pearl cruises on party pirate ship the *Jolly Roger* – to the rarefied, in the shape of swanky private charter catamaran *Seaduced*. We took the middle way, sailing out of Bridgetown Harbour on *Jammin Catamaran Cruises*. This is one of the newest vessels plying the west coast, and hits a lovely balance between relaxation and entertainment. Rum punch flows freely and the crew are game for a laugh, but there’s no pressure to join in unless you want to. There are slides off the back of the boat and two stops for snorkelling, one with turtles and brightly coloured fish. Our Sun Blast cruise, from 9am to 2.30pm, included hotel transfers, a snack breakfast, and a huge lunch, from \$90.

[jammincats.com](http://jammincats.com)

Having lazed in the calm shallows of the west coast, a



journey to the east coast shows that Barbados is an island of two sides. The Atlantic waves that crash on this side of the island – the most easterly in the Caribbean – give it a completely different character. The swells attract surfers, with the Soup Bowl the top spot for experienced riders. Beginners are better off at surf schools on the south coast, with more manageable breaks.

We opted to enjoy the wild beauty of the east coast in a more sedate fashion, passing the ruins of old sugar mills and quiet villages on our way to The Atlantis Hotel. This family-run property is famous throughout the island for its buffet lunch. Available on Wednesdays and Sundays for about £23, there’s a

huge choice of food with plenty of Bajan options. With plates piled high with roti, flying fish and macaroni pie, we sat on the terrace overlooking the crashing waves below.

[atlantishotelbarbados.com](http://atlantishotelbarbados.com)

Barbados has plenty going on underground, as well as overground, with networks of caves running through the limestone bedrock. The most famous is Harrison’s Cave. Most visitors take the tram tour, an hour-long, \$30 experience that slowly shuttles you through caverns of stalactites and stalagmites. It feels rather touristy but is low on effort and runs daily from 8.45am through to 3.45pm so needn’t be booked. There are more-adventurous options including treks



**TOP:** Harrison’s Cave

**FAR LEFT:** Catamaran cruise

**LEFT:** Soup Bowl beach at Bathsbeba

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LEFT: Barbados Garrison

RIGHT: Mount Gay Distillery

BELOW: George Washington House



➔ through nature trails and cave tours with headlamps and knee guards on offer too. [harrisonscave.com](http://harrisonscave.com)

Smaller and less visited, Animal Flower Caves at the island's northern tip are open at some points to the sea, with deep pools filled with sea anemones and formations coloured a range of greens and browns by the oxidation of copper and iron. Recommend clients visit before lunch, and stop at the clifftop bar and restaurant, where the food and the views are some of the best on the island.

▶ **A PLACE IN HISTORY**  
Barbados's beaches may be the biggest draw for today's

visitors from the UK, but anyone who doesn't drag themselves away from the sand for a visit to Bridgetown Garrison – the best-preserved 18th and 19th-century British garrison anywhere in the world – to learn about the island's history is missing a treat. Clients needn't be military history aficionados to enjoy the half-day guided Historic Garrison tour, which starts at George Washington House, a pretty complex at the heart of downtown Bridgetown. The ground floor is decorated as it would have been during Washington's day, and after strolling through history you head up to the first floor to visit the well-designed exhibition



space. It's small but perfectly formed, with interactive exhibits to keep even younger or more beach-blind visitors entertained. Then it's down to the Garrison Tunnels, built 200 years ago for drainage and as an escape route and rediscovered by accident only in 2011. Next up are the stout walls and large cannons of Charles Fort, built to protect Carlisle Bay from attack, and then more historic guns of every conceivable shape and size at the National Armoury Museum in an old powder magazine at St Ann's Fort, where there's time for a drink in the officers' mess before watching the Changing of the Sentry, the Bajan version of the Changing of the Guard. Running every Thursday from 9am to 12.15pm, this \$55 tour is a fascinating journey through the island's history with incredibly high-quality guiding, but clients can also visit independently during the rest of the week. [barbadosgarrison.net](http://barbadosgarrison.net)

Another aspect of Bajan history lives on, sampled every

day by locals and tourists alike. Yes, rum is as popular as it's ever been, whether drunk in tiny shacks by the road or at the bar of swish restaurants. Mount Gay is one of the island's most famous brands, and informative and fun tours are on offer at the label's Bridgetown headquarters. The 45-minute tours take visitors through a potted history of the sugar and rum industries and the background of the Mount Gay brand itself, ending with a tasting. These regular \$10 signature tours run from 9.30am to 2.30pm, Monday to Friday, and on Saturday between 10.30am and 2.30pm in high season, and don't need to be booked in advance. However there are special \$62 lunch tours that end with a delicious Bajan buffet on Tuesday and Thursday that do need to be reserved. [mountgayrum.com](http://mountgayrum.com)

▶ **NEW ACCOMMODATION**  
Holidaymakers are spoiled for choice when it comes to accommodation on the island, with everything from good-value hotels to some of the most luxurious addresses in the region on offer. Different sectors of the British market will feel the impact of new product on offer this season, including Sandals Barbados, which after opening in January 2015 is set for a major expansion with a whole 186-room resort being added next door to the existing property. Also new to the island's ➔



**Funway Holidays** offers seven nights on an all-inclusive basis in a Signature Room at Sugar Bay Barbados from £1,299 including return flights from Gatwick with Virgin Atlantic departing September 19. [funway4agents.co.uk](http://funway4agents.co.uk)

**Elegant Resorts** offers seven nights for two adults and two children at Port Ferdinand in a two-bedroom Luxury Harbourside Villa from £7,540, including British Airways flights and transfers. [elegantresorts.co.uk](http://elegantresorts.co.uk)

Agents booking seven nights or more at **Port Ferdinand** by February 12 for stays before December 19 will receive a £30 Love2shop voucher. Any tour operator reservation staff working with the agent will receive a £15 Love2shop voucher. [portferdinand.com](http://portferdinand.com)

➔ all-inclusive portfolio is Sugar Bay Barbados. Formerly the Amaryllis Beach Resort, its multimillion-dollar transformation was a hair's breadth from complete when we stayed in November. Just 20 minutes from the airport and set on a beautiful white-sand beach on the south coast dotted with loungers and hammocks, the 138-room property is light and bright, with a friendly atmosphere and colourful, boho-chic looks. The rooms, all with balconies, are in low-rise blocks, and it's worth upgrading to an oceanfront option for the lovely view at sunset, although if budgets are tight the pool view rooms are perfectly pleasant. There are a number of room types, including spacious family suites with a large sofa bed and two TVs, so there's no need to argue about what to watch.

The all-inclusive package is generous, with premium alcoholic drinks, afternoon tea with sandwiches, cakes and scones served on the terrace of the main Reef restaurant daily, Wi-Fi, non-motorised watersports, kids' and teens' clubs housed in cute, brightly painted beach huts, and the crèche, all part of the deal. Another nice touch is the departure lounge, an area with sofas and showers open to those whose flights are leaving later in the day - a great alternative to flying caked in sand and suncream. The pool



**A nice touch is the departure lounge, with sofas and showers for those with flights leaving later in the day**

is a decent size with a swim-up bar, and there's a games room with pool and table football, a spa and a small gym.

Main restaurant Reef has buffet breakfasts, lunches and dinners, but there are other options to keep guests from getting bored. Colin's Bar and Grill is a beachside outlet for barbecue, pizza or pasta lunches, and there are late-night snacks at the Lazy Mongoose Pub, a home from home for British drinkers. Guests can also dine once a week without charge at Sizzle Steak House and Japanese restaurant Umi. This hotel is a good-quality four-star and we found the service particularly friendly and personal.

Another new development is Port Ferdinand. Far from the bustling south coast, it is targeted at high-spending repeat visitors with an independent nature, particularly families or groups of friends. Set around a purpose-built

marina near Hometown at the northern edge of the platinum coast, the two, three and four-bedroom residences are huge and extremely luxurious, starting from 2,500sq ft, and all come with a 50-60ft private berth in the marina.

We fell immediately in love with our three-bedroom residence. Each bedroom is large and en suite, so there'll be no squabbles if groups of couples are staying together. All open on to the huge public spaces - a fully equipped kitchen and a spacious living area from which sliding glass doors open on to a frankly vast balcony, with sofas, a large dining table and views over the boat-lined marina where you can spot turtles splashing in the water. Finishes are the highest quality, from oak joinery and marble bathrooms to limestone flooring and coral-rendered walls.

There's not the communal aspect of a hotel on offer, though there are some services, including a pool, a beach, a luxurious spa, a watersports centre, a very well-equipped gym, a kids' club operating in high season and a couple of restaurants: an informal spot serving casual lunches around the pool, and 13/59, a fine-dining outlet offering tasting menus and à la carte options made from locally sourced produce. Consider booking a hire car for guests staying here, as the area within walking distance of the marina is quiet.



**LEFT:** Sugar Bay Barbados  
**BELOW:** Port Ferdinand

