

Treasure islands

Jo Cooke lines up some can't-miss experiences across the Caribbean

If you had a pound for every time you've heard someone say, "the Caribbean is more than just sun, sea and sand", you'd probably be rich enough to retire.

The three 'Ss' often lure clients to the region in the first place – and let's face it, they are reason enough to jet off to these tropical shores – but it's also true that between them, the islands of the Caribbean offer more thrills and spills than a theme park.

It would be a shame, then, to miss out on all those must-see experiences by spending the whole time soaking up sun. Why not whet clients' appetites with a handful of the most exciting adventures – it's certainly enough to tempt them off a sunlounger.

LOVE THE NIGHTLIFE

If you want to get a party started, invite a West Indian! Nowhere else on the planet will you find

revellers to rival these folk. From the salsa clubs of Havana, Cuba, to the beach bonfire nights on Frigate Bay, St Kitts, and the fish-frys of Saint Lucia and Barbados, snake hips and intoxicating beats seem to come as standard.

The people of the Dominican Republic need absolutely no excuse to start a party, and you often find DJs playing and impromptu dancing at the local car wash. The Jamaicans, on the other hand, would spend their last dollar on a live music event, and there are festivals and concerts year-round, island-wide.

Antiguans take things to another level. At Shirley Heights, you'll find them boogieing from sunset until dawn every Sunday night – a hard-core way to kick-start the working week. Pre-book the experience with hotel pick-up through Do Something Different, from £27.

The ultimate celebration of ➔

→ hedonism, though, has to be Carnival in Trinidad. Every February, the entire island (and savvy travellers who book a room in time) enjoy five days and nights of non-stop soca bands, performances, street parades and fabulous costumes. Pack a supply of Berocca and unleash your inner party animal.

▶ TREASURED TRAILS

It's not just the palm-fringed beaches that will have you reaching for your selfie stick. There is just as much beauty inland, where rivers, waterfalls, rainforests and mountains make a jaw-dropping backdrop to that Facebook photo.

You can hike and birdwatch to your heart's content on and around the Piton peaks in Saint Lucia, (Sandals' excursion provider, Island Routes, has a Gros Piton Hike from Soufrière, from \$110).

Alternatively, trek to the summit of St Kitts' Mount Liamuiga to see a sunken volcanic crater; marvel at Mina Falls in the vast rainforest reserve of El Yunque National Forest, Puerto Rico; or check out the unusual fauna and flora on an amble through Aruba's



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ABOVE:
Mount
Liamuiga,
St Kitts

BELOW:
St George's,
Grenada

rugged and arid Arikok National Park.

But arguably, above and beyond the rest when it comes to grandeur and views, are Jamaica's Blue Mountains. You can admire these rolling, emerald-green hills from the veranda of a coffee plantation, sipping a cup of the world-renowned brew (Thomson's Town and Country excursion, with pick-up from various Montego Bay hotels, starts at £120).

Alternatively, summon up your stamina to climb the six miles to the lofty Blue Mountain Peak, or take the easier option with a downhill bike ride (local operator Blue Mountain Bicycle Tours has a trip from \$129).

Some 2,256 metres above sea level, guides recommend you set off in the early hours, so you reach the summit just before sunrise. That's the time when the bluish mist, which gives the range its name, tends to lift, revealing a panoramic vista of Jamaica and a glimpse of Cuba, to boot.

▶ HOTTEST CITIES

After a bit of beach bliss, why not check out a buzzing metropolis? The Caribbean's capitals are not only the hub of local life, but brimming with culture and history. Lovers of fine architecture might enjoy a morning wander around Willemstad, Curacao, a Unesco World Heritage Site, where brightly coloured, 17th-century Dutch colonial buildings line the waterfront.

For Victorian and Renaissance splendour, there's Bridgetown, Barbados, home to the third-



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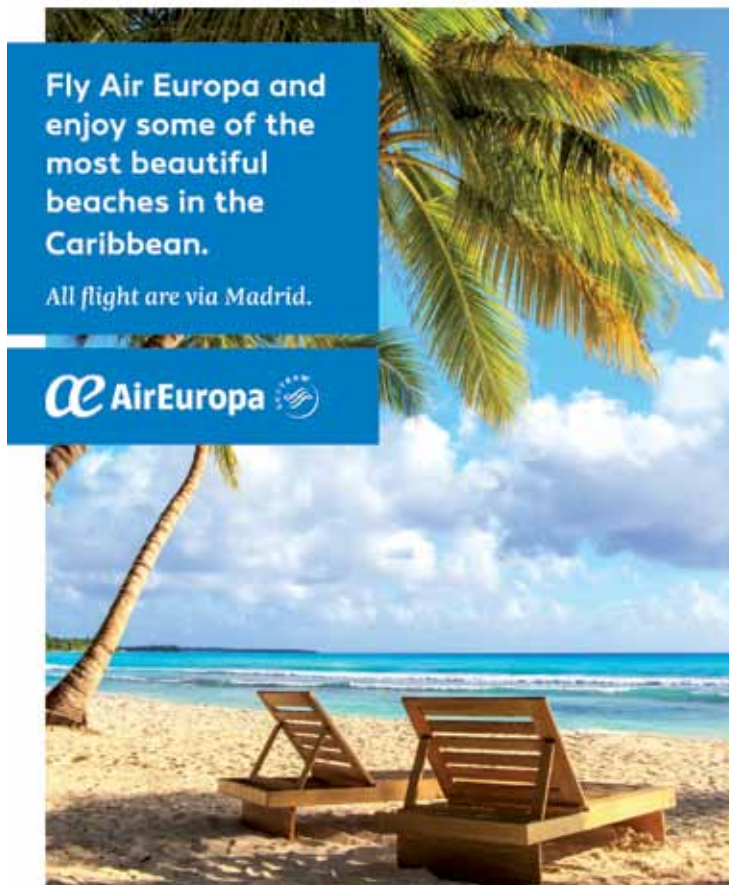
ABOVE: A 4WD safari in Aruba
LEFT: Bob Marley Museum, Kingston
FAR LEFT: Hunte's Gardens, Barbados

→ oldest parliament building in the English-speaking world, Norman-style churches and a synagogue founded in 1654.

For picturesque perfection, perhaps nowhere is more photogenic than the harbour front of St George's, Grenada. Beautifully restored Georgian

warehouses are bathed in sunlight as they overlook the harbour (Island Routes' Spicy Full Day Island Tour, from \$105).

Over in Kingston, Jamaica, music fans can take a nose around the former home of Bob Marley, learning fascinating facts about the musician's



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work, personal life and the assassination attempt on his life.

An all-round winner, though, is San Juan, Puerto Rico, with its classical Spanish architecture. Despite being hard hit by Hurricane Irma, at its best, the city is relaxed, walkable and intriguing. The welcoming locals always seem to have time to say hello, offer recommendations or point you in the direction of the two fortresses, ancient city wall, museums, art galleries, piazzas, cafes, music bars and speciality shops.

▶ FLOWER POWER

You can't help but be uplifted by the bright hues of the Caribbean, from the clothes people wear to the colours the bars are painted and, of course, the rainbow of exotic blooms. Ginger lilies, bougainvillea and flamboyant trees with their scarlet blossom edge the roadside, and many hotels cultivate gardens that wouldn't be out of place at the Chelsea Flower Show.

Visiting one of the region's many botanical gardens is



The waters teem with such an abundance of wildlife, you feel as if you are snorkelling in an aquarium

bound to brighten up a stay. At Shaw Park Gardens in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, palms and ferns shroud a waterfall, and you can watch hummingbirds feed on the nectar of hibiscus and allamanda flowers.

The Botanical Gardens of Nevis are both formal and whimsical, with roses and cacti, Buddha statues and water features.

One of the best established is the Botanic Gardens of St Vincent. Founded in 1762, it has an astonishing collection of plants from across the globe, plus a nursery for rare species.

However, if there was an award for the most outstanding garden

in the West Indies, it could easily be claimed by Hunte's Gardens in Barbados. When it comes to ingenuity and tranquillity, you can't beat it. Created from a deep, steep-sided gully, a narrow, meandering path descends through thickly planted terraces to an oasis of calm at the base of the garden. Here, starbursts of flowers and giant shiny leaves conceal stone benches, strategically placed with romantic moments in mind.

▶ ADRENALINE SHOT

For those who like an excursion that gets their pulse racing, there's the chance to zip-line through treetop canopies above a gorge in Antigua (Island Routes, from \$125), white-water raft on the fast-flowing Yaque del Norte river, Dominican Republic, (Thomson, from £61), or pair the two with a zip-lining and river tubing combo in Ocho Rios (Attraction World, from £85).

For a few spills on the water,



LEFT: Klein Bonaire island

you can body and boogie board at Crane Beach on Barbados's Atlantic coast, where endless rollers break over the pink sands. If your clients are already skilled surfers, they could head to neighbouring Bathsheba, known for its challenging tube-like wave formations.

The West Indies has some fabulous spots to hone kitesurfing skills, too. The cross breeze that caresses Saint Lucia's Sandy Bay makes it the pick of the crop, and there's a great school and equipment for hire.

For something unique and unexpected, why not suggest an ATV Tour on the north coast of Aruba to your clients? They'll kick up a cloud of orange dust as they power their quad bike across the moonscape-like terrain, see a former gold mine, then take a cleansing dip in volcanic rock pools, formed by lava stone at the bottom of an ashen cliff.

▶ OCEAN ENCOUNTERS

Aquariums give you the chance to see a mass of marine life without leaving dry land, but

nothing can compare with seeing those same critters in their natural habitat. If you head to Tobago Cays in the Grenadines, or Bonaire in the Dutch Antilles, marine parks with protected crystal-clear waters teem with such an abundance of fish, you feel as if you are snorkelling in an aquarium anyway.

Want to see some turtles doing their thing? You'll find them hanging out in the lush sea grass around Klein Bonaire.

Some of the best places to observe dolphins swimming wild include the shores of Dominica, the west coast of St Vincent and the West End in Negril, Jamaica.

Perhaps the best natural interaction to be had is at Stingray City, Grand Cayman. At this sizeable sandbank, a few miles out in the ocean, you can stand in the turquoise shallows as schools of cute and curious stingrays swim around your toes. There's no need to even don a snorkel to see them up close and personal – just sit back and let them come to you. Now that's a bucket-list item ticked off. **TV**