

# Bajan beauty

With all eyes on the south coast of Barbados, Erica Bush checks into the newly relaunched, all-inclusive O2 Beach Club & Spa



**Y**asmin Vicarrondo likes to do things differently. She stands next to an easel in front of us – a backdrop of rolling waves and afternoon sunshine behind her – and shows us how to use a small piece of cardboard as a painting tool.

We stare at her blankly from the shade of a large manchineel tree, our toes in the sand, wondering when a paintbrush will come into play. It doesn't. Instead, we dip our piece of cardboard into acrylic paint and drag it along the canvas to form the blended colours of a sunset, using the cardboard's edge to define palm trees and rocks.

Yasmin is unfailingly encouraging. Dressed in a pink T-shirt and a straw hat adorned with brightly coloured flowers, she peers over our artwork with a knowing eye and a "Can I?", before holding the canvas

herself and making small, deft enhancements. When we're done, I hold my painting up to the sky and squint at the finished product. Yasmin was right – cardboard does work.

#### AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES

Our beachfront painting class is one of several new masterclasses at O2 Beach Club & Spa, a newly relaunched hotel on the south coast of Barbados.

Connecting guests with the island and its people was a key aim when the hotel reopened at the end of last year, and it offers a range of 30-minute 'how to' experiences – from how to make your own body scrub to how to play the steel pan – that guests can sample as and when they please. The resort is also rolling out 'learn to' experiences – with experts like Yasmin, a Venezuelan-born artist who has lived in ➤

Aerial view of O2 Beach Club & Spa's beach and pool

# DESTINATIONS

## CARIBBEAN | BARBADOS

3  
OF THE  
BEST

### EXCURSIONS



#### Cool Runnings Catamaran Tour

Book clients a boat trip where they can frolic with turtles and snorkel in the clear waters of the Caribbean Sea. Cool Runnings provides lunch and sunset cruises aboard a fleet of catamarans as well as a luxury catamaran product, Cool Runnings IV.



#### St Nicholas Abbey

Visit one of the oldest sugar estates on the island, dating back to the 1630s. The mansion is one of only three remaining Jacobean mansions in the western hemisphere and can be explored at leisure or as part of a guided tour.



#### Sunflower Stables Barbados

Clients wishing to tick off the bucket-list experience of horse riding in the sea are in luck. Sunflower Stables Barbados offers a morning of swimming with these beautiful creatures followed by a beach picnic with rum punch.



### top tip

Agents can learn more about the O2 Beach Club & Spa and earn up to £40 per booking by registering for the training and rewards programme at [oceanhotelsrewards.com](http://oceanhotelsrewards.com)

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A Luxury Collection Junior Suite, Acqua Spa, and pool and beach, all O2 Beach Club & Spa

PICTURES: Winter Park Photography; Autosync Media; Shutterstock/Jade Prevost Manuel, J Leacock



Barbados for 24 years – which are slightly more in-depth and focused on giving visitors meaningful experiences.

It's a theme that continues across the hotel. Formerly Ocean Two Resort & Residences, O2 Beach Club & Spa is one of the newest hotels on Barbados, yet authenticity is at its heart. The resort worked with local designer Michelle Leotaud to showcase island art – some professional like Yasmin's, some up-and-coming – making for something akin to a local art gallery, with motifs of turtles, sunsets and beaches at every turn.

#### SUITE DREAMS

There are contemporary touches too, of course. The original structure of the hotel, which was constructed nine years ago, has been renovated and repositioned as an upmarket, all-inclusive hotel. The property features 130 rooms and suites, split across three collections: the Club Collection, featuring 18 large ocean-view or oceanfront rooms; 42 adult-only Luxury Collection Suites; and 72 Concierge Collection Suites. The Luxury Collection Suites are located in a new adult-only, nine-storey tower and include several swim-up suites that offer direct access to the river pool from the privacy of their terraces.

Both the Luxury Collection Suites and the Concierge Collection Suites boast views of the Caribbean Sea and offer inclusions such as a bottle of champagne, daily pre-stocked minibar with wine, personalised concierge service and spa credit per adult per stay. Concierge Collection Suites also benefit from cocktail essentials in the minibar, in-room stocked grocery items for the suite's

“The resort showcases island art – some professional, some up-and-coming – giving it a feel akin to a local art gallery

kitchen on request and a Concierge Ambassador, who can be contacted by guests ahead of their stay.

Food and beverage options include fine-dining experience Oro, located on the top floor of the new tower building and serving European cuisine with a Caribbean twist; casual hang-out spot Elements, which also serves breakfast; beachside grill Bluefin; and a nautical-themed, rooftop tapas restaurant called Brisa.

The Acqua Spa is the hotel's crown jewel, holding court across an entire floor in the tower building. Said to be the highest spa on the island, it's everything your average spa is not. Gone are the days of dimly lit treatment rooms: Acqua is bright, light and oh-so-white, with wide windows offering stunning sea views.

Guests can try a signature treatment curated around the theme of 'wellness through water' or opt for what is reportedly the only hammam in Barbados.

Jacqui McDermott, sales and marketing manager at Ocean Hotels Barbados, which also owns sister properties Sea Breeze Beach House and South Beach, says the aim was for O2 to carve out its own niche ➤



ABOVE: A 'reggae reggae' bus in Holetown, southwest Barbados PICTURE: Shutterstock/Frank Fell Media; Autosync Media

within the island's high-end hotel scene, differentiating itself from the plantation-style hotels and the all-singing, all-dancing resorts.

### SEA CHANGE

Jacqui also believes the reopening of O2 marks a step change for the island. A new wave of premium hotels on the south coast is slowly disproving the myth that the only place to stay is on the glitzy Platinum Coast.

The four-star, all-inclusive Sands Barbados opened three years ago on the south coast, located 15 minutes from the airport and the lively island capital, Bridgetown. InterContinental Hotel Group's Hotel Indigo brand is set to open on the island's Richard Haynes Boardwalk, replacing what was once the Caribbee Hotel on Hastings Main Road in Christ Church. And not far from Bottom Bay and The Crane Hotel, a new 450-room Wyndham Grand hotel is being built on the site of the former Marriott Sam Lord's Castle, which was burnt down in 2003. Sandals Royal Barbados has also added two wellness-inspired restaurants, plus a new wing with swim-up suites and two extra pools.

Already known for the fishing village of Oistins and its Friday Fish Fry, and upmarket restaurants such as Champers, the south coast is a good base to access all that the island has to offer. From O2, we enjoy a tour in a 4x4 Jeep with local company Island Safaris, visiting key spots like the fishing village of Bathsheba, home to the iconic, mushroom-shaped Three Boys' Rock; Morgan Lewis Windmill, the oldest surviving cane mill in the Caribbean; and, of course, Rihanna Drive, where the singer grew up.

### WEST SIDE GLORY

The south coast is only a short drive from the west coast too, meaning all of its new product is within easy reach. The House by Elegant Hotels has renovated its food and drink offering, making room for a fresh dining space and full-service kitchen, while a new hotel that recently broke ground in Carlisle Bay near Bridgetown is expected to be a new Hyatt Hotels property under its family-friendly Ziva brand.

The renowned Cliff Restaurant closed during the pandemic and was bought by British-born

Barbadian resident and fintech entrepreneur Michael Kent. The property underwent a huge renovation and has reopened under the leadership of celebrated Italian chef Antonio Mellino, offering restaurant Quattro Passi at the Cliff and a bistro-style sibling, QP Bistro.

Former Cliff Restaurant executive chef Paul Owens has set up his own venture, oceanfront Paul Owens at The Beach House, which serves the chef's signature dishes as well as a weekly Bajan Sunday lunch. There's beachside bolthole Sea Shed in exclusive Mullins Bay, which opened in 2019, and The Local & Co, a new farm-to-table dining experience in the island's northernmost town, Speightstown.

Improved product, combined with the island's new independence, means Barbados is having one of its busiest years. Though the pandemic was tough, there's a feeling that the events of the past two years have shaken things up. Like using cardboard instead of a paintbrush, travellers to Barbados might well wish to do things differently too – and staying on the south coast is a great place to start. **TW**

## ASK THE expert



"Barbados is so much more than dazzling, white-sand beaches and turquoise water. The island teems with culture and history, including its nearly 400-year-old capital, Bridgetown. It's a foodie's paradise, and we encourage visitors to try everything, from our fine-dining spots, such as Quattro Passi at the Cliff, to our boho-chic beach bars, such as La Cabane and Sea Shed. Our bountiful street food is a must-try, from Oistins Fish Fry to authentic Bajan fare at any of our 1,000 rum shops."

**Lennon Chandler, business development officer, Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc**



"Upsell clients to the Concierge Collection Suites and new Luxury Collection Junior Suites to earn yourself extra commission from the higher-priced rooms. Your clients will get breathtaking views of the Caribbean Sea as well as a host of additional inclusions."

**Jacqui McDermott, sales and marketing manager, Ocean Hotels Group Barbados**

## BOOK IT

**Caribtours** offers seven nights' all-inclusive at O2 Beach Club & Spa from £3,125, based on two adults sharing a new Luxury Ocean View Junior Suite in June. Includes flights with Virgin Atlantic from Heathrow and private transfers. [caribtours.co.uk](http://caribtours.co.uk) [o2beachclubbarbados.com](http://o2beachclubbarbados.com)