



Love at first sight

The south coast of Barbados is prime territory for a maiden visit to the Caribbean, discovers **Lauren McCarthy**

my favourite trips are usually those with so much to see and do that I treble my daily steps, rather than a relaxing fly-and-flop where I might sit back and read a book. Safe to say, I didn't expect Barbados to offer the ideal balance of both.

Yet as soon as the turquoise-blue waters of the island's south coast came into view on the final approach to Bridgetown, it was unlike any other sea I've seen from the seat of a plane. Knowing I was about to get my first taste of the Caribbean with a week exploring the island's buzzing south-coast spots, I felt a

mix of excitement and peace wash over me – a combination I would soon get used to with this lively yet laid-back island nation.

RISE AND SHINE

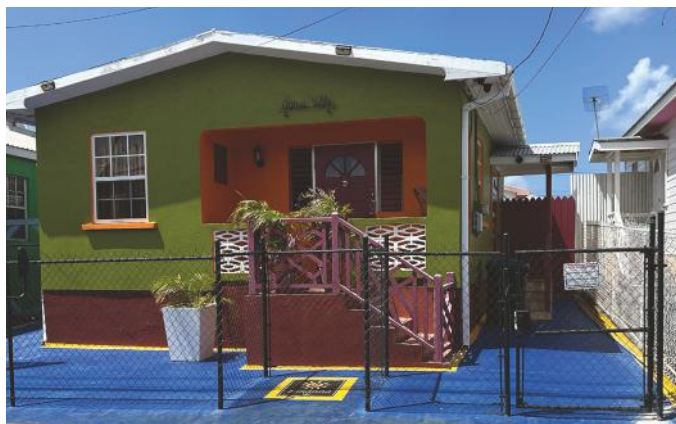
Waking up the next morning, I was greeted by the sound of waves rolling on to the shore and the sun starting to cast its first golden rays over the white-sand beach. Stepping onto my balcony at Sea Breeze Beach House, an Ocean Hotels property a 15-minute drive from the airport, I couldn't have felt farther away from the rest of the world.

Though eager to go for a dip in the sea, a red flag rained on that parade for the rest of the ➤

Hobie catamaran at Sea Breeze Beach House

DESTINATIONS

BARBADOS | CARIBBEAN



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Rihanna's childhood home; writer Lauren at The Rockley; a 4x4 tour of Barbados with Island Safari PICTURES: Lauren McCarthy; Island Safari



day. But a sunset cruise with Tiami Catamaran Cruises (from \$100 per person) offered an alternative way to get out on the water. Even before we'd set sail, a turtle popped its head above the surface, tapping the side of the yellow catamaran with its flipper, as if it wanted to come along for the ride. That alone was enough to boost my mood, but the joyful sound of the steel-pan drummer on board helped too.

We sailed along the west coast to Bridgetown's Carlisle Bay, where the sea was calmer, affording us the opportunity to jump off for a snorkel. I was soon surrounded by a school of shiny sergeant major fish, and looking to the seabed, I could glimpse a shipwreck – one of six in Carlisle Bay – that serves as a home for many of the colourful sea creatures.

Fish weren't the only species I had the chance to see. On a

“We pass by a rainbow of houses as colourful as a child's painting – the most photographed of which is Rihanna's childhood home

4x4 tour of the island's verdant central hills and rugged east coast with Island Safari (from \$110 per person), we spotted green monkeys – introduced from West Africa more than 350 years ago – plus endemic Barbados Black Belly sheep.

WILD RIDE

Careering along the rough, off-road track was like being on a thrilling theme park ride. Our stops included

Gun Hill Signal Station and viewpoints with sweeping vistas that no camera could ever do justice to, while passing by palm trees towering over a rainbow of houses as colourful as a child's painting.

Perhaps the most photographed of those jazzy buildings is Rihanna's childhood home – the humble lime-green and terracotta-hued bungalow sits on the aptly renamed Rihanna Drive in Bridgetown. The house is now listed on Airbnb, but fans can still pose for photos outside.

FRY-DAY FUN

For clients keen to sample more Caribbean culture, the Oistins Fish Fry is a Friday night institution. Here, street chefs serve mouth-watering fish dinners to a hungry crowd of Bajans and tourists, with plenty of sides including salads, ➤

WHERE TO STAY

Sea Breeze Beach House

This Oistins resort is well-suited to families and has a relaxed Caribbean feel with wooden cabanas, a rum shack on the beach that serves small bites and three pools. Having won the Inclusivity Initiative of the Year Award from *Travel Weekly's* luxury sister title *Aspire* last year, it is a great choice for LGBTQ+ clients. Rooms start at £480 per night based on double occupancy, all-inclusive.

sea-breeze.com

O2 Beach Club & Spa

Ideal for clients seeking a resort with plenty of Bajan activities. Daily 'how to' lessons include blowing a conch shell, playing dominoes and making a body scrub. The sea view from the eighth-floor spa – said to be the highest spa on the island – is phenomenal, while back at ground level, swim-up rooms offer guests some secluded lounging space next to the pool. Rooms from £414 per night based on double occupancy, all-inclusive.

o2beachclubbarbados.com

The Rockley

A hotel that will help your clients to embrace island culture, with a lobby gallery showcasing local art (100% of earnings go to the artist), Bajan slang on the walls and a restaurant that's used as a co-working space by locals during the day. Four of the restaurants on the nearby beach boardwalk are included in the dine-around plan. Rates from £181 per night based on double occupancy, including breakfast.

therockleybarbados.com

BOOK IT

If Only offers seven nights' all-inclusive in a Luxury Ocean View Junior Suite at the Sea Breeze Beach House from £2,829 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes Virgin Atlantic flights and private transfers, and is valid for departures from May 30 to October 31.

ifonly.net

DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | BARBADOS

PARTY
time

Crop Over Festival (July/August): A month of markets, music festivals and parties that culminates in the Grand Kadooment carnival parade.

Food and Rum Festival (November): Taste dishes from Barbados's hottest culinary talent while sipping creative cocktails in the birthplace of rum.

Open Water Festival (November): For clients who want more than just a quick dip in the ocean, suggest the five-day Barbados Open Water Festival, which features a series of competitive and amateur open-water swimming races.

Run Barbados Marathon Weekend (December): The long-standing Barbados Marathon weekend sees runners follow a 26-mile route along the east coast. Wellness activities, including yoga and nature walks, are also on the agenda.



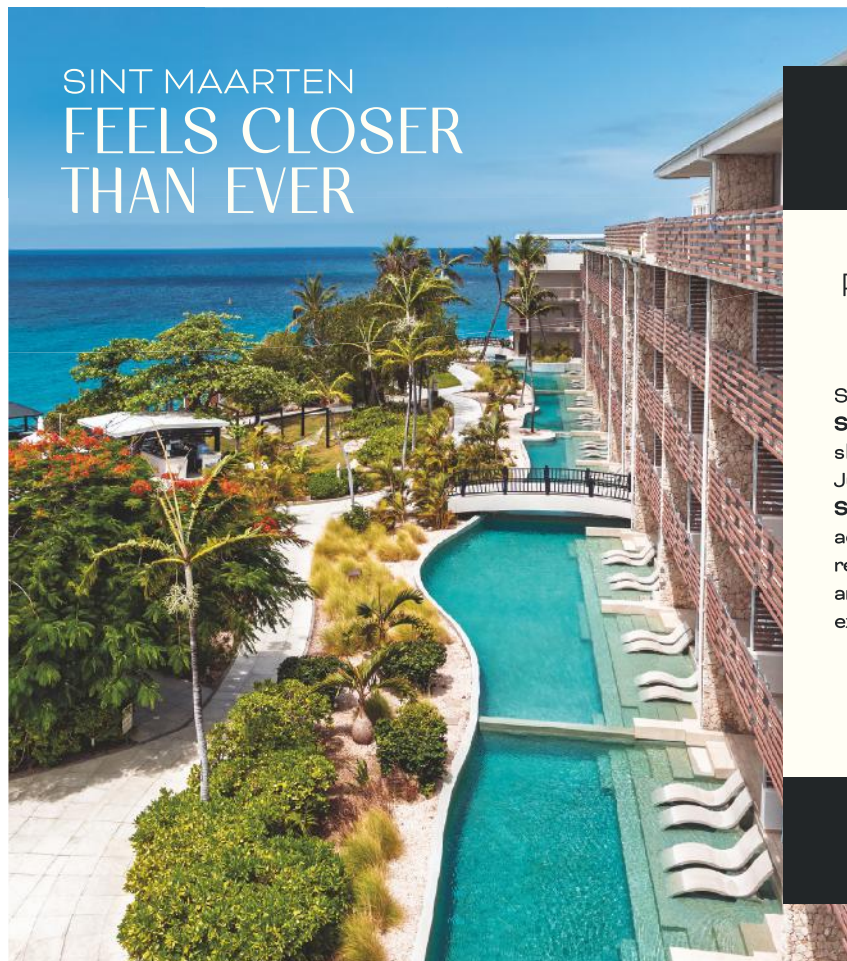
ABOVE: The Oistins Fish Fry is a Friday night institution PICTURE: Shutterstock/Tom PJ

fries and the cheesy Caribbean staple of macaroni pie.

The atmosphere is lively, with reggae and calypso anthems being played on stage – all to a backdrop of clicking dominoes. This much-loved pastime is played in streets, parks and homes at all hours, making it the ultimate expression of Bajan community life.

Beyond its beaches and tourist hotspots, community is the driving force here, with people who are friendly, helpful and eager to show off the island they so obviously love. For a first-time visit to the Caribbean, Barbados provides a warm and welcoming introduction – proving even a beach escape can come with plenty of surprises. **TW**

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