



Going green

Joey Tyson gets back to nature in Barbados with adventures at sea, on land and underground

Close your eyes and you'll hear rain," says Tom. We're standing in the middle of a small forest, high up in Barbados's central hinterland. Enormous cabbage palms surround us and gigantic parasol leaves block out the sun. The wind, swirling up from the coast below, rushes around their thick trunks, and a gentle sound, almost a soft applause, fills the trees.

Tom Hinds, our guide, has lived at eco-retreat Naniki lodge for years, yet every morning he says he's fooled by this same trick, as if nature's playing a little joke on him. "It's so easy to sleep here," he muses as we walk on through the forest.

As we traipse further into the bush, Tom points out the diverse Bajan fauna: fiery African tulips, leaves ablaze in orange; bulbous baobab trees; and towering bread fruits – a major contributor to the Caribbean menu – provide shade from the heat. Eventually, we work our way out into a clearing; below, the coastline stretches off and curls south. Even from here, it's possible to see the long, white ripple of surf crashing onto the shore.

Forest walks aren't typically what most people associate with this island. With beaches of pristine sand and sapphire seas, most people's experience of Barbados's beautiful outdoors starts and ends with

its wondrous coastline. Perhaps rightly so – you'd be missing out on some of the Caribbean's prettiest shores if you didn't visit the beach in Barbados – but that's only the start of what this island can offer.

ON LAND

After our walk, we're put through our paces in an hour-long yoga session with local instructor Ekam Yoga. Downward dog, warrior, snake and child: one by one, the poses come, and with each passing move, it becomes increasingly clear that 'flexible' isn't a word I should ever use to describe myself.

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Luckily, the spectacular setting is enough to distract me from my feeble yoga skills.

Up in Barbados's interior, there's a serene atmosphere. Far from the bustle of the beaches, it's a ➤



fast fact

Britain is Barbados's biggest market, with the UK accounting for 36% of visitors last year, according to the island's tourism minister



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Yoga at Naniki lodge; Cool Runnings Catamaran Cruises; Harrison's Cave; Bridgetown's parliament building; Carlisle Bay

PICTURES: Barbados Tourism Marketing; Shutterstock



WHAT'S NEW IN BARBADOS?

✿ Bridgetown's airport is set to double in size, with a public-private partnership expanding the terminal by 27,000 feet and modernising its infrastructure. It forms part of a plan to target a million visitors a year – compared with 687,000 in 2018, itself a record year. Initiatives include a project to increase the island's 6,500-bed capacity, while a thrice-weekly Lufthansa flight will start on October 28.

✿ A night market with a carnival theme has opened at the Pelican Craft Village, as has a heritage railway to St Nicholas Abbey. There are also plans to develop a trail taking in Bridgetown's historic sights.

✿ In January, Barbados outlawed the importation, sale and use of single-use plastics.

different story entirely; a place of endless rows of sugar cane, sun-scorched plantation houses and quiet, remote (as remote as you can get on an island that you can drive across in an hour) townships. It's not hard to see why the lodge has incorporated yoga into its product.

Besides yoga and short forest walks, Naniki lodge offers longer hikes down into the surrounding valley, but with legs still aching from a particularly strenuous downward dog, we stick to the short version. A yoga and walk package costs £31 including breakfast; a night in one of the lodge's 10 wooden cottages starts at £106.

UNDERGROUND

Look at a map, and you'll notice Barbados is slightly farther east than its Caribbean cousins. This is crucial in making it unique. Unlike most of the other islands, which are volcanic, Barbados is made largely from coral-like formations.

Traces of this milky-grey rock are all over the island; the most distinctive example is Bridgetown's colonial-era parliament building. Porous and delicate, centuries of erosion have created an extensive network of remarkable caves across Barbados.

Harrison's Cave in the centre of the island is probably the best known and most impressive. An

ethereal cavern of natural sculpture, some breathtaking, some bordering on the bizarre – not least a chamber of stalagmites that have more than a hint of the phallic about them – tours wind down through the cave, taking in underground streams and eerie caverns.

At 15 metres high, the Great Hall, an ancient cityscape of turrets

and pinnacles, is the centrepiece. A live cave, its strange subterranean formations are still growing, albeit at a rate of an inch per 100 years.

The cave is certainly one of the island's more unusual attractions, and makes for an excellent day trip from the coast. It's also one of the easiest to experience, thanks to its purpose-built track and electric trams, which

whisk tour groups through the caverns (tours start at £20).

For more adventures in geology, Animal Flower Cave, known for its natural rock pools and sea anemones (known locally as 'animal flowers'), can be found on the island's northern tip, near Connetton.

AT SEA

With only a handful of high-rise buildings dotted across the island, the coastline has retained a lot of its natural beauty: viewed from sea, it's a canvas of deep green, intermittently interrupted by long ribbons of white sand, gleaming under a Caribbean sun. The only way to see it in its full glory is from the water.

Cool Runnings Catamaran Cruises runs half-day trips from Bridgetown. Complete with an unlimited bar and a belt-busting buffet lunch, the laid-back crew offer the full Bajan party experience.

Besides the food and drink, it's an excellent way to witness the wildlife

of Barbados. Following a dip with a few curious turtles, the next stop is the *Bajan Queen*, a hulking trawler scuttled off the coast of Carlisle Bay. The vessel used to be a party boat; now, an ecosystem for marine life, it attracts a different sort of crowd, namely shoals of kaleidoscopic tropical fish, turtles and other sea life.

This being Barbados, there's also a beach stop. Secluded and backed by a handful of small buildings, it's every inch the Caribbean dream: sand as white as a sugar cube, lapped by water of pure turquoise. Cruises start at £78 per person.

Even without a boat trip, it's easy to find a staggering beach. Hastings' Rockley Beach and Carlisle Bay are both reachable from the island's colourful capital Bridgetown; the latter is a five-minute walk. On an island this small, you're never too far from something beautiful. **tw**

RUM TASTING AT MOUNT GAY DISTILLERY

Food and drink is central to the true Bajan experience – and nothing on the island is more quintessentially Bajan than rum. A trip to the Mount Gay distillery is a brilliant (and slightly boozy) way to see this part of Barbados life.

More tasting session than in-depth view, the distillery tour begins with a mini history lesson and a cup of powerful rum punch, before a short video explains the brewing process and the 300-plus-year history of Mount Gay.

There's a party vibe throughout. At one point Tina, the group's guide, asks for a favourite karaoke song and an impromptu singalong version of *My Girl* breaks out. We learn about 'rum legs' – the streaky residue left on the glass after swirling the spirit around that shows a rum's age – and the distillery's links to the sea, as sailors transporting



its rum were said to be the first to discover that it ages better in barrels – a process still used by Mount Gay today.

The finale is the highlight: a tasting of four rums, ranging from classic Mount Gay to Mauby, a limited-edition rum brewed with tree bark. We're done in an hour, and a lovely buzz tingles as I step out into the warm Caribbean sun.



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