



Battle of the sands

There's more to the Caribbean than just its beaches, but they're a good place to start, finds Jo Cooke

They're the stuff that dreams are made of, but not all beaches are created equal. Here's our guide to some of the best spots for clients looking to flop out on a stretch of Caribbean sand, with something to suit every taste - from water sports enthusiasts to sun-seekers who don't want to move an inch.

▶ **BEST FOR SWIMMING**
The Baths National Park, Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands:

Getting to this beach feels like an adventure in itself. You'll walk down a narrow, winding path, squeezing past curvaceous

boulders, before arriving at a bay that brings to mind the land that time forgot. Giant pebbles seem to grow in size as they edge out into the blue, and it's all backed by a slope of golden sand. Swim to your heart's content in the crystal-clear rock pools alongside schools of fish, all with a backdrop of glamorous yachts anchored off shore.

Doctor's Cave Bathing Club, Montego Bay, Jamaica: Singled out as one of the best beaches on the island back in 1906, when it was turned into a beach club, the small entrance fee (around a

five) is well worth shelling out if you want to spend the morning at this exquisite stretch of white sand before the crowds arrive. Off-shore inflatables give you a resting spot as you swim in the waters that are part of Montego Bay's Marine Park.

Grote Knip, Curacao: Located on the northwest coast, this low-key cove is a little off the beaten track but has all the facilities you need - beach bar, massage shack, loos, loungers and kayak rentals. It's set back between limestone cliffs, making for an attractive and sheltered swimming spot. ➔



LEFT:
Beaches
Negril,
Jamaica

RIGHT:
Underwater
Sculpture Park,
Grenada

BELOW:
Cockleshell
Bay, St Kitts



▶ BEST FOR FAMILIES

Long Bay, Negril, Jamaica: A stroll along Jamaica's premier beach reveals craft stalls, fruit stands, music bars and vendors offering horse rides and glass-bottomed boat trips. Long Bay in Negril, as its name suggests, goes on and on – and then on some more. Around five miles of white sand gently shelves into shallow, turquoise waters that rarely get choppy, making it ideal for little ones.

It doesn't have to cost a packet to hang out here, either. Family rooms can be had at simple, beachside B&Bs such as Rooms Negril. But for clients who want to thoroughly spoil their offspring, nothing tops Beaches Negril. Here, kids can feel like, well, kids in a sweet shop. There's Pirates Island water park, plus hydrobikes, kayaks,



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paddleboards and even a kids' scuba programme, plus plenty of indoor activities for when they need some time out from the sun.

Palm Beach, Aruba: More calm waters await on this Dutch island's party strand. Book a day cruise from the jetties or a banana boat ride from one of the kiosks. Broad and long, it has plenty of space for the likes of beach tennis, volleyball, sandcastle-

building or just relaxing, with beach hawking banned.

Four Seasons Resort Nevis:

For upscale and educational kiddie activities on another child-friendly sweep of sand, suggest Four Seasons Resort Nevis. Youngsters can get involved in a sea turtle conservation programme, learn about coconuts – from growing to picking – or go crab hunting and green monkey spotting.

▶ BEST FOR WATER SPORTS

Cockleshell Beach, St Kitts:

This nook of soft sand on the southern reaches of the island is St Kitts' water sports hub. You could make it across to neighbouring Nevis and back by renting a kayak or small catamaran from here, trade winds permitting. Lessons in

paddleboarding, waterskiing, kite surfing or the wacky sport of flyboarding are all on the menu too.

Jabberwock Beach, Antigua:

On the more rugged northeast of the island, this bay catches the cross winds, so beginners can hone the tricks of the trade while staying close to land, while further along the bay, adrenaline junkies can test their skills to the limit. Experienced instructors are on hand and all kit can be rented.

Grand Mal Bay, Grenada:

Do some sightseeing via paddle power from pretty Grand Mal Bay. Push off aboard a glass-bottomed kayak and you soon reach Grenada's Underwater Sculpture Park to see an array of sea-barnacled statues. It's just north of the capital, St George's. →



▶ **BEST FOR ROMANCE**

Playa Fronton, Samana Peninsula, Dominican Republic: In true desert-island style, this beach is best reached by boat, although a horse ride or a two-hour hike are other options for the hardy. With little more than coconut sellers, it's far from the madding crowd. The shock of white sand is dwarfed by the towering cliffs that form a crescent around it, while tropical foliage provides privacy, should other boats arrive. Fancy a stroll hand-in-hand? The shoreline is strewn with sea shells that make great keepsakes. The water can be choppy at times so this spot is better for canoeing than swimming.

La Sagesse, Grenada: Need to be alone? If you didn't know this beach was here, you'd probably never find it, and hopefully no one will find you and your other half here, either. Peeping out from a forest of palm trees, La Sagesse is where the countryside meets the ocean, and it's the perfect place to snuggle up together with a good book.

Harbour Island, the Bahamas: Three miles of pink sand and only a handful of low-rise, small-scale accommodation on the entire island mean peace, quiet and space are guaranteed here, and it's just a ferry ride from Nassau.



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▶ **BEST FOR LOCAL LIFE**

Winnifred Beach, Port Antonio, Jamaica: If clients are up for some rustic cool, Winnifred provides. Reached by a potholed road, this public beach, largely frequented by Jamaicans, offers a large helping of local vibe - think car stereos and portable radios blasting out reggae next to seafood stalls and craft vendors, with shade provided by sea grape trees instead of parasols. The secluded cove has pristine waters, and local fisherman can take you around the coast to glimpse the luxury waterside villas and Blue Lagoon.

Pinones Beach, Puerto Rico: Street-food cafes, vast stretches of sand, rock pools and boardwalk nature trails - this is where the Puerto Ricans head for some R'n'R at the weekend, and you get a warm welcome when you join them. It's just half an hour's drive east of the capital, San Juan.



Bathsheba, Barbados: With its jungly feel and rip-roaring breakers, few visitors venture out here. Bathsheba, on the Atlantic shore, has a couple of bars and a convenience store, and that's pretty much it, in contrast to the thriving tourist buzz of the west coast. Pack a picnic and idle a day away, paddling and watching the surfers.

▶ **BEST FOR SNORKELLING**

Harbour Village Beach Club, Bonaire: Those staying at this Small Luxury Hotels of the World property, and folk purchasing a day pass, are in for exceptional snorkelling. A reef conservation programme is luring sea critters like bees to a honeypot. Float a few metres out from the glorious, private beach, and ocean life will unfold before your eyes. Rays, flounder, barracuda and all manner of fish - angel, butterfly, parrot and spotted trunk, to name but a few - go about their business here.

Sugar Beach, Saint Lucia: If you like your snorkelling to be accompanied by dramatic scenery, head for this bay backed by Sugar Beach, a Viceroy Resort. Swim beneath the Piton peaks, alongside the cliff-face towards open ocean, and with each stroke you'll meet more species of tropical fish.

Porter's Beach, Barbados: A swathe of gorgeous white sand meets clear blue waters where turtles often congregate. For those who like to make no effort to see marine life, this is a good bet. Wade in with your snorkel on and you may get to watch them in action.

ABOVE: Bathsheba, Barbados

BELOW: Sugar Beach, Saint Lucia



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