

Hey mon, what's new?

Some things in the Caribbean never change but there are also new attractions and possibilities in this popular vacation region

By Janet Groene

Do you love Jamaican haunts made famous by such luminaries as Noel Coward, Errol Flynn and Ian Fleming? Do you yearn to return to old Nassau or the Barbados known as “Little England?” Here’s a small sampling of what’s new in the sunny Caribbean.

Nassau, Bahamas

Now Nassau has two, glittering casino complexes. Atlantis is on Paradise Island but travellers can stay and play nearer Bay Street at the Sheraton Nassau Beach Resort on historic Cable Beach. The resort has a casino, show lounge, restaurants and shops. A dazzling pool complex has grottos and waterfalls. Beyond it lie the sandbox beach and transparent sea.

Greycliff Inn is Nassau’s grand dame, as old-world luxurious now as it was when Winston Churchill stayed here. The cellar is a goldmine of rare wines. Dine in splendour, then have a hand-rolled cigar from the inn’s own cigar works.

Find local crafts at the cruise terminal just off Rawson Square, where you’ll also see the bronze statue, Afro- Bahamian Woman, by Toronto-born sculptor Randolph Wardell Johnston (1904-1992). In 1951 he moved his family to a remote Bahamian island, where he lived until his death.

Details: Bahamas Tourism at bahamas.com. Bring U.S. dollars if possible. Avoid taking Bahamian change.

Jamaica

Once smitten with Jamaica's "irie" spirit, visitors return again and again. Stay in a toasty beach resort or high on a leafy mountainside. All-inclusive resorts were perfected here. They range from the uber-upscale Grand Lido, a SuperClubs brand, to bargain alternatives. Shop carefully. Some are clothing optional, for switched-on singles, or overrun with squealing children. Know too that "allinclusive" doesn't mean "all." Read the rules.

Half Moon Rose Hall is classic Jamaica, timeless and elegant since the 1950s for royal guests and Hollywood elite. Today the resort covers 400 acres and has 51 swimming pools. Stay in a suite or posh pool villa, jog the two-mile beach, play tennis or 18 holes of championship golf, ride horseback, have spa treatments and choose from many dining venues. The city-size resort has its own, 24-hour medical centre.

Details: Tourism information at visitJamaica.com. Violent crime is a problem but most resorts have excellent security. Be wary of venturing out on your own. U.S. dollars are accepted almost everywhere. Jamaican currency has little value.

Curacao

Derelict homes and shops of Willemstad's old Jewish quarter were lovingly restored, forming a hotel resembling a sun-baked village. Stay at the Kura Hulanda for plush accommodations, fine dining and downtown shopping. A shuttle serves a sister resort at the beach. The hotel has a clinic offering dialysis, allowing renal patients to vacation while continuing their treatments.

Also on the island are a dolphin therapy centre, biofeedback clinic and the wheelchair-accessible Dolphin Suites Hotel. While caregivers get a respite, many levels of care are available here for their loved ones.

Be among the first to discover Curacao's posh new (March 2010) Hyatt Regency Curaçao Golf Resort, Spa and Marina. It offers 18 holes of championship golf, a white sand private beach, full-service spa, three restaurants, multiple swimming pools and 350 rooms with water view. Join Hyatt's Gold Passport program and earn points for use at Hyatts worldwide.

Details: Tourism information at curacao.com. Traveller's cheques, credit cards and U.S. dollars are widely accepted.

Barbados

Weekend fish fries are still traditional in the fishing village of Oistins. A favourite with Canadians and Britons, Barbados has many hotels and guesthouses plus modern all-inclusives including three Almond Resorts. One rate covers meals, spirits, entertainment and water sports. All three have similar features, so choose a location near Bridgetown, the airport or the lively nightlife in St. Lawrence Gap.

If you like a cliffy, surf-slammed Atlantic view, stay on the island's east coast. The west coast faces the Caribbean Sea. The south coast is also a playground for beachgoers and surfers.

Details: Barbados tourism at Barbados.org for lists of all types of lodgings. Almond Resorts at AlmondResorts.com. The Barbados dollar is worth about U.S. 50 cents. U.S. dollars are widely accepted.

St. Martin/Sint Maarten

Another Caribbean destination with a big, international airport, this half-French and half-Dutch island gives twice the bang for the buck (and guilder and Euro). In the Dutch capital, Philipsburg, find luxury goods and whizbang nightlife including 14 casinos. The French side is known for superb restaurants and art galleries.

It's a tiny island so see it all. Dive on a British frigate that sank in 1801. Snorkel in gin-clear waters. Get a tan on topless beaches. Stay in a high-rise hotel, a guesthouse, a self-catering apartment. LaSamanna is a five-star Orient Express resort with sumptuous spa and sparkling infinity pool. Take a room, suite or villa.

There's also a superb choice of accommodations ranging from private villas to self-catering condos. For travellers who collect points in a guest loyalty program, there are also chain hotels including Westin, Radisson, two Sonestas and a Wyndham.

Details: Tourism information at VacationStMaarten.com and st-martin.org. Many places on the French side quote rates in Euros while U.S. dollars are more commonly used on the Dutch side.

If you go:

Limin' in the Caribbean

We might call it hanging out or chillin.’ In the Caribbean, liming is laid-back relaxing with a cold drink, probably one with a wedge of lime and a tot of Barbados rum.

Currency

The U.S. dollar circulates commonly on most islands, so Canadians may save confusion and conversion fees by bringing greenbacks. Credit cards are also a plus. Check with your credit card company first to see what conversion fees are charged, usually zero to as much as four per cent.

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