

Destination Caribbean Islands

Pulsed by music, rocked by change, lapped by blue water, blown by hurricanes, the Caribbean is not a place anyone would call static. It's a lively and intoxicating profusion of people and places spread over 7000 islands (less than 10% are inhabited). But, for all they share, there's also much that makes them different. Forming a huge swath around the Caribbean Sea, the namesake islands contradict in ways big and small. Can there be a greater contrast than between socialist Cuba and its neighbor, the bank-packed Caymans? Or between booming British-oriented St Kitts and its sleepy, Dutch-affiliated neighbor St Eustatius, just across a narrow channel?

The diverse cultures of the region reflect the myriad influences that have washed over the islands through the centuries. Perhaps the greatest example of this ebb and flow can be found on St-Martin/Sint Maarten, which speaks French and is aligned with France on one half, and speaks Dutch and is aligned with the Netherlands (and calls itself Sint Maarten) on the other half. In one 30-minute drive across its minute 37 sq miles (96 sq km) you can change languages six times.

Or there's Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Sharing one island, Hispaniola, the differences are stark – Haiti was once the stronger of the two but now it is the poorest country in the hemisphere. Across the border the Dominican Republic speaks Spanish and has a Hispanic culture that is much closer to pre-revolution Cuba than it is to French-speaking Haiti.

This tangle of colonial ties continues to unravel. The Netherlands Antilles, the ultimate hodgepodge of islands tossed into a basket by their colonial masters, finally came undone in 2008 as each island staked out an identity apart from the others. Although even here colonial ties proved compelling as Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius decided to in effect become municipalities of the Netherlands (albeit warm ones) while Curaçao and Sint Maarten decided to follow the lead of Aruba, which had left the Netherlands Antilles for near independence in 1986.

The greatest political changes in the Caribbean have had nothing to do with old colonial powers, however. Ruling regimes are being sent packing across the islands, usually at the ballot box and usually peacefully. The old postcolonial regime of the Bird dynasty was shooed out of its Antiguan nest in 2004. But in 2006 St Lucia brought back its longtime pre-independence leader (before 1979!) John Compton (now in his 80s) for another go as prime minister. In 2007, Jamaicans ended the 18-year rule of one party and replaced it with another. Whether this will do anything for the endemic corruption or high murder rate is the number-one conversation starter.

Celebrity gossip even played a role in the Bahamas elections. The ruling party was tainted with allegations that it had given Anna Nicole Smith what was in effect rock-star treatment by granting her almost immediate residency. That she died shortly thereafter didn't help what was very messy situation. The result was the opposition party won the elections. To the south later that summer, the opposition won a landslide victory in elections on the British Virgin Islands.

Although typically it didn't involve an open election, in 2008 Fidel Castro relinquished his title of president after nearly 50 years in power,

'The diverse cultures reflect the myriad influences that have washed over the islands'

THE AUTHORS HAD FUN TOO (PART ONE)

Their experiences researching this book are informative, cautionary and entertaining.

What Was Your Best Experience?

- Hanging out with Violet, the owner of the Miss Emily's Blue Bee Bar, and hearing stories about past customers while sipping a goombay smash. (Amy C Balfour, the Bahamas)
- I had two: doing a night dive with hyper nurse sharks off of Saba and hiking the Quill on Statia with five archaeologists taking the day off from work. (Brandon Presser, Saba and Sint Eustatius)
- Dancing at 3am in a Port-au-Prince club to RAM – the best Vodou rock & roots band out there. (Paul Clammer, Haiti)
- Several: wandering around Old San Juan, cycling on Vieques with my family, watching Rincon sunsets, visiting a coffee farm in the central mountains. (Brendan Sainsbury, Puerto Rico)
- My best experience was the festival J'ouvert and playing mas the next day. That's when the music truly made so much sense to me. (Ellee Thalheimer, Trinidad and Tobago)
- Seeing a 3m-long manatee swim past me while diving off the Isla de la Juventud in Cuba. (Tom Masters, Cuba)
- Being on Barbados for the election. It was the most civilized voting I have ever seen, yet it was a huge event: the party that had been in power for 15 years was voted out of office. Everyone was talking about it and yet there was none of the demonization of the opposition or the violence that happens elsewhere. (Ryan Ver Berkmoes, Antigua and Barbados)
- Sitting two rows back from the dugout on the first-base line at a baseball game in Santo Domingo. (Michael Grosberg, Dominican Republic).
- Honestly? Feeling like I really loved my girlfriend and proposing to her. (Josh Krist, Romantic)

What Was Your Worst Experience?

- The overnight ferry to George Town, Exuma, from Nassau. We caught the fringes of Hurricane Stella. The crew decided to show the movie *The Holiday* with Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet on a big TV, with the volume loud. Unfortunately, the disc would get periodically stuck and repeat portions. In the middle of the night the boat was heaving up and down, it was freezing, and the first six seconds of the movie's introductory music would play and then repeat every six seconds. This went on for hours. (Amy C Balfour, Bahamas)
- My hotel reservation was cancelled at a place in Guadeloupe and all the other places were full. Luckily, the guy at Ti Village Creole found a room for us at his place – he wanted to help travelers in trouble. (Josh Krist, Guadeloupe)
- Not organizing internal flights so I had to do the 12-hour bus trip from hell (Port-au-Prince to Jérémie) in both directions. (Paul Clammer, Haiti)
- Seeing how some quiet beaches I enjoyed on my last trip to Aruba are now backed by huge condo developments. The islands are growing incredibly fast. The desalination plant makes me think of one of those old Looney Toons cartoons where an overtaxed machine would have smoke coming out the seams while rivets popped off. (Ryan Ver Berkmoes, Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao)
- Getting totally chowed by mosquitoes upon arrival at a low-budget hotel in St Thomas. (Karl Zimmerman, US Virgin Islands)

and many wondered what was next for the sleeping giant of the Caribbean. Meanwhile over on Barbados, the conservative ruling party that had been in power for 15 years was ushered out in a landslide victory by the center-left opposition who ran under the theme of 'change.'

Change. It's probably one of the most clichéd political themes now but it lies at the heart of all the recent upsets in Caribbean elections. Voters no longer choose the party that makes the biggest promises. Too many murders and years of huge projects that only run up debt and produce little benefit have voters taking the longer view. (The African cliché of the huge hospital building without enough money for bedpans is also often true here.) 'Maybe if the government gives them less while spending more on basics like crime prevention, they'll have more in the future' is a popular line of thought.

'A poll showed that more than 80% of people liked having tourists on their island'

Meanwhile the long-term issues for the islands are many, and first among them is tourism. Each year more and more people are arriving on the islands looking for their fun week in the sun. To places that have little more to offer than gorgeous waters, beautiful beaches and outgoing literate people this would seem to be an ideal situation. And in many ways it is. A poll in 2007 across several islands showed that more than 80% of people liked having tourists on their island. What would be the results of a similar poll in New York, London or Paris?

But now the islands are beginning to realize that there may be limits to a good thing. Development is surging across the Caribbean, and new resorts and condos are appearing like mushrooms after the rain on formerly undeveloped coasts from Aruba to St Kitts to the Turks and Caicos. (After hotels had vacancies during Christmas 2007 many worried about who exactly would take all the new condos off developers' hands.)

But for islands that have never flourished on their own and where tourism represents the only hope after the collapse of commodity economies based on sugar, the question is: what else can they do? For even as discussions are beginning about limits on growth, it is continuing unabated. The region is not taking the lead environmentally although there is awareness. The report on the state of islands worldwide by *National Geographic Traveler* in 2007 got attention across the Caribbean, especially on the low-scoring Jamaica, and St Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. Even the top scorers took note: Bonaire publicized its tie for number 17 even as locals fretted over the line: 'poised for over-development.' (The top Caribbean scorers were Dominica and the Grenadines.)

Hurricanes are one thing that all the islands wish would go elsewhere. Two of the most powerful Category 5 storms roared across the region in 2007 and the trend is upward. Even comparatively minor tropical storms cause enormous damage as was seen in the Dominican Republic in 2007.

It's important to remember the good news. The region cheerfully acknowledged its British roots by successfully staging the Cricket World Cup in 2007 and things are looking up even for Haiti, where the UN has helped bring a peace that is allowing the Haitians to contemplate their future rather than fear it.

Questions and contradictions aside, the Caribbean is sure to continue as a place of strongly defined cultures unique to the planet. One need only attend Carnival on one of the islands to understand that blandness is *not* in their future.

Getting Started

The Caribbean is not tough travel, it's delightful travel. Sure, you might miss a flight but it's a beautiful place to be stranded and the local vibe is the antithesis of the Type-A fretting over details. Relax, mon. The fun is deciding when and where to go. This chapter will help you decide on your type of trip and when you'll go.

Delving deeper, Itineraries (p33) will give you some ideas about destinations as will Snapshots (p41), which covers the cultural fabric of the Caribbean. For beginning to sort out details about activities, accommodation or a myriad of other questions, the Caribbean Islands Directory (p815) will guide you to the info you want in the individual island chapters. Caribbean Islands Transportation (p829) will do the same, helping you get to your chosen islands and showing you how to get around the region.

WHEN TO GO

The most popular time for travel to the Caribbean has nothing to do with the weather there. It's all about the weather elsewhere. From mid-December to mid-April 'snowbirds' flee winter in North America and Europe for the balmy climes of the islands.

During this high season, tourism is at its peak and indeed around Christmas, Easter and school holidays some islands simply sell out. Prices spike and places are crowded but it's also the time when virtually everything is open.

You can enjoy a dramatically discounted 'summer' by visiting the islands during the lengthy low season, mid-April to mid-December. Prices at hotels fall by 40% or more, package deals are common and popular port towns don't look like a scene from a cattle call. The downside is that some resorts and attractions may simply close and your transport options will be reduced. In addition, the trade winds aren't as prevalent in summer, so the chance of encountering oppressively muggy weather is higher. Summer is also the hurricane season, particularly bad in August and September, when some hotels, restaurants and shops simply close for the month. If you're more interested in the culture of the islands as opposed to sleet-avoidance, this can be an ideal time to visit.

See p821 for climate charts.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

The Caribbean islands are casual, so only bring light, comfy clothes: a bathing suit, T-shirt and shorts will be your wardrobe. Add long pants or a dress or skirt for swanky nights out. If you're coming from winter in Minneapolis or Montreal, don't be fooled into thinking you need a sweater. You don't! One long-sleeve shirt to prevent sunburn or mosquito bites will be plenty.

A few essentials you don't want to forget:

- basic medical kit
- strong mosquito repellent and sunscreen
- sun hat
- a small quick-dry towel, for those times when the whim to swim hits
- flashlight with batteries (nighttime reading with partner, blackouts)
- plastic resealable bags – essential for keeping things dry (eg camera, airline tickets, passports)
- Lonely Planet's *French Phrasebook* (for Guadeloupe, Martinique, St-Barthélemy, St-Martin and Haiti) and *Latin American Spanish Phrasebook* (for Cuba, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic)

The authors of this book agree that the sweet spot for visiting the islands is November and early December. Rates are still low but the weather is good, except possibly where you live, thus giving you one more justification for the trip.

Another impetus for the timing of your trip might be one of the out-sized festivals that are the cultural events of the year on every island. For a few of our favorites, see p823.

COSTS & MONEY

In general, traveling in the Caribbean islands is expensive, but costs can vary greatly depending on which islands you visit when, the type of accommodations you choose and how you travel.

Accommodations will generally be the heftiest part of your budget. St Vincent and the Grenadines, the Dominican Republic and Cuba are among the places where you can beat the averages. On islands such as Barbados and Trinidad, a conventional hotel room or apartment can be quite reasonable; on pricier islands such as Antigua, Aruba or Grand Cayman, a comparable room could easily cost twice as much. Places such as St-Barthélemy and the Virgin Islands are always much more expensive than average.

Of course the type of accommodations will also dictate cost – daily rates can vary from US\$50 at a guesthouse to US\$1000 at an exclusive resort. In

'Hurricane' is derived from an old Taíno word for 'huge winds sent by the Goddess.' Damn woman.

THE AUTHORS HAD FUN TOO (PART TWO)

Their experiences researching this book are informative, cautionary and entertaining.

Best Advice for a Friend?

- Book your accommodations well in advance! (Brandon Presser, Anguilla, Saba, St-Barthélemy, Sint Eustatius and St-Martin/Sint Maarten)
- In Puerto Rico you've got to get off the main tourist track and scratch underneath the surface in order to uncover the intricacies (and beauty) of the local culture. What you see isn't always what you get. (Brendan Sainsbury, Puerto Rico)
- Don't go over Christmas, take your time to cruise through the Grenadines and take half as much stuff as you think you need. (Scott Kennedy, St Vincent and the Grenadines)

What About the Caribbean Challenged Your Preconceptions?

- Sint Eustatius and Saba: the strangest little slices of paradise I've ever seen. So quiet, down-to-earth, like no other islands in the region. (Brandon Presser, Saba and Sint Eustatius)
- French islands are not as expensive as you think. As my fiancée explained, the French take lots of vacations and they watch every centime – hoteliers and restaurants have to give good value for money if they want to stay alive. (Josh Krist, Dominica, Guadeloupe and Martinique)

What Was the Biggest Surprise or Lesson You Learned?

- The continuing interconnected relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti: how events of over 150 years ago are still very alive in the minds of many people, how the histories of the two countries are so intertwined, and the fact that the DR used to be the poorer, weaker relation. (Michael Grosberg, Dominican Republic)
- How friendly Haiti was, how safe it was and how easy it was to get around (as long as one remembers this is not a First World destination). (Paul Clammer, Haiti)
- How undeveloped parts were. St Lucia was full-on developing world, reminding me of Africa. It was much less polished almost everywhere and fewer tourists than I expected. (Scott Kennedy, St Lucia)

this book we've listed accommodations as follows: budget under US\$100; midrange US\$100 to US\$200; and top end from US\$200 up. These prices are for high season.

Food can be relatively expensive in the Caribbean. A great way to save money is to sample some of the local street food, which is usually both cheap and delicious. Seafood dinners in open-air seaside restaurants (always a treat) can be pricey, but savoring the same fare at a 'local' restaurant can cost half as much. Another good way to save costs is to rent a room or villa with a kitchen, shop at the colorful markets and cook for yourself. In this book, we've listed meal prices as follows: budget is under US\$10; midrange is US\$10 to US\$25; and top end is anything more than that.

Transportation costs vary greatly. Car rentals generally cost between US\$40 and US\$80 a day. On the more developed islands, public buses provide a cheap way of getting around (plus a good dose of cultural immersion). Some island groups have cheap ferries, and if you make your plans in advance you can get decent-priced air tickets. See the Transportation chapter (p833) for details.

Note that irritating little costs can add up quickly, including local hotel taxes, departure taxes and hotel service charges (up to 25%).

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged our readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic independent travel affords. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

Tourism pays the bills in most of the Caribbean, and the impact on the environment and the culture is huge. Most islands are still putting economic development ahead of the environment because poverty is so widespread. But you can do your part and make a difference. Here are a few pointers for minimizing your impact.

Consume Less

- Do not waste water. Fresh water is an extremely precious commodity on all of the islands, where desalination plants work overtime converting saltwater to fresh.
- Many islanders depend only on rainwater collected in cisterns, so keep in mind that winter – peak tourism time – is the driest time of year.
- If the water is safe to drink, use it to fill containers, skipping bottled water and its transport and refuse costs.
- Travel globally; shop locally. Not only will buying local products infuse the local economy, it will also help to save you money. Local beer is always fresher than imported.
- Rarely is it so hot in the Caribbean that you need air-con at night; turn it off and let the breezes in.
- Never buy any souvenirs made of coral, seashell or turtle shell. Buying goods made with any of these only encourages environmental destruction and hunting.
- Ride the bus instead of renting a car. You immerse yourself in local culture while you save gas.
- If you rent a car, decide if you need it for your entire stay. You might just need it for a day or two of exploration.

Antigua is just daring someone to check its claim that it has 365 beaches – or one for every day of the year.

Countries in the Caribbean with Unesco World Heritage sites include Cuba (8), Dominica (1), Dominican Republic (1), Haiti (1), St Kitts and Nevis (1) and St Lucia (1).

TRIP STYLE

There are as many ways to enjoy the Caribbean as there are islands. Here are some of the styles you might want to consider for your trip.

- Classic Island Holiday – You go to one place and you hang out there. Enjoy plenty of beach time and explore the towns and wilderness areas at your leisure.
- Islands by the Group – You go to one group of islands linked by ferries and you sample a few neighboring islands. There's no big travel drama and in the cases of near siblings like St Kitts and Nevis, the differences are greater than a few miles of water. See p834 for some of the island groups you could consider.
- Islands by the Dozen – Plan ahead, get cheap tickets, pack extra-light and experience a broad range of islands. See p34 for ideas.
- Cruise Control – Yes, the stereotypes of bloated tourists yakking about their raid on the buffet are often true. But there are also boats and ways to travel that reward the independent traveler. See p830 for ideas and details.
- Dirty Weekend – Find some gorgeous little beachside place and fly to that island direct. Skip a rental car and enjoy your weekend luxuriating, swimming, sunning, whatever!

Show Respect

- Never litter – sure, you'll see many locals do it, but you definitely shouldn't. Almost everything discarded on land makes its way to the sea, where it can wreak havoc on marine life. Carry your trash off beaches, trails and campsites, and pick up a few extras left by others.
- Many people, especially vendors in the marketplaces, do not like to be photographed; ask first, and respect the wishes of those who refuse.

Slow Down

- When driving on the islands, keep an eye out for pedestrians and stray dogs, chickens and goats, all of which meander aimlessly on the island roads.
- Take time for pleasantries. Always start with 'Good day,' *'buenos días'* or *'bonjour'* before launching into a conversation or abruptly asking questions; you'll find that a smile and a courteous attitude go a long way.

Be Eco-smart

- Look for hotels and resorts that carry an audited green certification. A good place to start your search is at **Eco-Index Sustainable Tourism** (www.eco-indextourism.org), which features businesses that have been recognized as environmentally and socially responsible.
- Ask your hotel about its green practices. Even if they have none, it'll tell them it matters to customers.
- Don't patronize swim-with-dolphins attractions. The practice has been condemned by environmental experts, and many of the mammals are caught in the wild and made captive for the enjoyment of tourists.
- When diving, snorkeling, boating or just playing in the water, remember that coral is a living organism that gets damaged with every touch, kick or step.

Although the image of the pirate ship flying the Jolly Roger skull and crossbones flag is iconic, in reality most flew the flags of their intended victims to better effect surprise. They were pirates after all.

READING UP

Reading books while lounging on some lovely beach is for many the perfect trip (in addition to a sublime rum punch, of course). One way to extend



TOP PICKS

TOP BEACHES

These are classic places for Caribbean fun in the sun. Some offer big-time glitz with stylish bars and a full range of services. Others are hidden gems where you might find a beach bar in a shack and someone to rent you some snorkeling gear and a lounger. Or you might find nothing at all except beautiful sand lapped by azure waters.

- Dover Beach, Barbados (p686)
- Frigate Bay Beach, St Kitts (p502)
- Eleuthera, the Bahamas (p92)
- Shoal Bay East, Anguilla (p428)
- Les Salines, Martinique (p622)
- Long Bay, Jamaica (p247)
- Marigot Bay, St Lucia (p638)
- Morne Rouge Bay, Grenada (p712)
- Grace Bay Beach, Caicos (p121)
- Seven Mile Beach, Grand Cayman (p196)

TOP WAYS TO GET SWEATY

There's a lot to see and do in the wilds of the islands. Whether it's ascending a volcano, hiking a wilderness area or seeing some of the legendary treasures beneath the surface, you'll start thinking about changing that ticket home.

- Hiking the volcano on Nevis (p513)
- Diving Bonaire's reefs (p799)
- Experiencing Barbuda's Codrington Lagoon (p533)
- Climbing the Quill on Sint Eustatius (p486)
- Swimming with sharks on Saba (p478)
- Diving Tobago's underwater canyons (p758)
- Hiking La Soufrière in the Parc National de la Guadeloupe (p564)
- Canyoning on Dominica (p594)
- Exploring the British Virgin Islands' RMS *Rhone* (p398)
- Hitting the trails at Virgin Islands National Park (p372)
- Hiking Cuba's Viñales (p160)

TOP PLACES TO MAKE LIKE A PIRATE

Arrrrh! The Caribbean has a bounty of booty for pirate fans. Start with these ayyyye-deas.

- Old San Juan's two Unesco forts (p331)
- St Vincent, where *Pirates of the Caribbean* was filmed (p660)
- Pirates of Nassau museum, Bahamas (p69)
- Île-à-Vache, where Captain Morgan used to hang out on Haiti (p272)
- Jamaica's Port Royal (p230)
- Pirates Week on the Caymans (p212)

the joy is to start your Caribbean reading before you go. The following books will inform, entertain and inspire you before and during your trip. Books more relevant to the individual islands are listed under Books in the Directory of each chapter.

More than 50% of the population of St Vincent is involved in the cultivation of bananas.

- *The Pirate's Daughter* by Margaret Cezair-Thompson. In 1946 actor and rogue Errol Flynn was shipwrecked by a hurricane off Jamaica. This novel spins a yarn of mixed-race Flynn-spawn and their search for a place in white society.
- *Dead Man in Paradise: Unraveling a Murder From a Time of Revolution* by JB MacKinnon. The author's uncle was murdered in the Dominican Republic in the 1960s. Plunging deep into the countryside, MacKinnon unravels stories of corruption and dictatorship.
- *The Slave Ship: A Human History* by Marcus Rediker. Over three centuries, 12 million Africans were brought to the US and Caribbean as slaves. Few accounts survive, but using existing records Rediker constructs a complete and horrifying picture.
- *The Republic Of Pirates* by Colin Woodard. By the 16th century no ship in the Caribbean was safe from pirates. Woodes Rogers was given the job of wiping them out. He did and Blackbeard lost his head.
- *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit That Changed the World* by Dan Koepfel. Dictators, American marines and slaves helped make the banana the world's favorite fruit. Its impact on the Caribbean has been enormous and now it faces genetic extinction.
- *A Caribbean Mystery* by Agatha Christie. The beach and Agatha Christie, can millions of vacationers be wrong? Here Miss Marple is shipped off to the Caribbean for her arthritis and corpses appear...
- *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat. Oprah loved this tale about a girl living a simple life in Haiti, who then goes to live with her mother in New York City. The descriptions of West Indies life are lyrical.
- *Captive of My Desires* by Johanna Lindsey. Gabrielle is descended from pirates but loves strapping American sea captain Drew, who hates pirates. What's a girl to do? This bodice-ripping, best-selling beach read is a Caribbean fantasy ride.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The Caribbean has scores of websites that will help travelers but most are specific to the scores of islands. Look in the Internet Resources section of each chapter's Directory for many good ones.

For regionwide info, a good place to start is lonelyplanet.com, where you'll find succinct summaries of the islands, plus the Thorn Tree online forum, which has a special branch devoted to Caribbean travel, another devoted to Cuba and a special worldwide Diving & Snorkeling branch.

The following should also help you get started:

Caribbean Hurricane Network (www.stormcarib.com) Hurricanes are blowing through at record levels and this fascinating site keeps track of all of them in real time.

Caribbean Travel (www.caribbeantravel.com) The official website of region-wide tourism authorities has a good section on tourism news across the region. A new parade in honor of a national hero? It's here.

Caribbean Travel & Life (www.caribbeantravelmag.com) The online version of this monthly magazine posts feature stories and planning tips for resort-style holidays.

Caribseek (www.caribseek.com) A good search directory with links to sites throughout the Caribbean.

CBC (www.cbc.bb) The Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation is the BBC of Barbados and its website has an excellent Caribbean news section.

Cruise Critic (www.cruisecritic.com) Offers profiles and frank reviews of cruise ships, cruise industry news and analysis, and it has the most active and candid discussion boards about all things connected to Caribbean travel.

Pirate Jokes (www.piratejokes.net) You'll be hooked by this site with thousands of jokes, most more profane than this family friendly one: Q: Why couldn't the pirates play cards? A: The captain was standing on the deck.

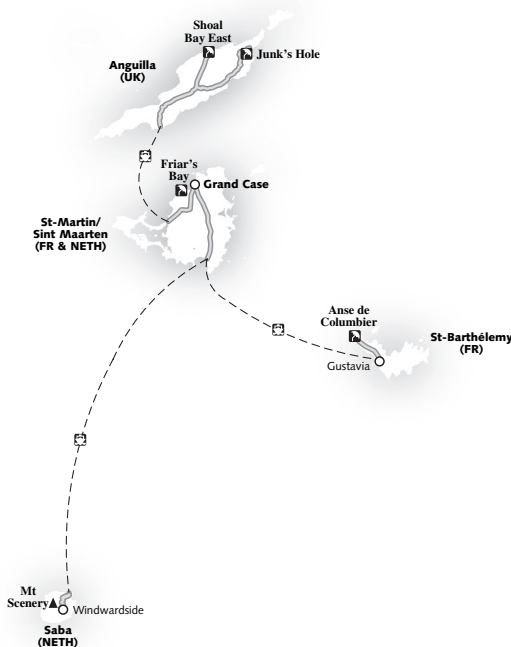
Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

A FERRY FANTASY One Week / St-Martin/Sint Maarten to St-Barthélemy

Once off the plane in **St-Martin/Sint-Maarten** (p434), you can island-hop your way around some of the Caribbean's cutest islands by ferry and never see another plane until it's time to go home. St-Martin/Sint Maarten will be your hub.

Head to the French side of the island and hang out in **Grand Case** (p445). For beach time try the local favorite **Friar's Bay** (p444). Catch a ferry to **Saba** (p469), which has a volcano that acts as a beacon during the 90-minute trip. Explore the small town of **Windwardside** (p473), then head out into the bush for a rugged hike up the literally named **Mt Scenery** (p476). Rent some diving gear and explore submerged pinnacles that teem with nurse sharks. Head back to St-Martin/Sint Maarten, then make the 25-minute run to **Anguilla** (p419). Once there, choose between two beaches: popular **Shoal Bay East** (p428) or the quieter, windswept **Junk's Hole** (p429). The 45-minute ferry from St-Martin/Sint Maarten to **St-Barthélemy** (p454) is famous for being a wild ride. Have lunch at the gorgeous French village of **Gustavia** (p458), and then sun yourself on white-sand **Anse de Columbier** (p464).



This itinerary takes advantage of the best network of ferries in the Caribbean. Cruise ships would seem to be the perfect way to get from one island to another but the companies absolutely refuse to consider one-way or partial passage between ports.

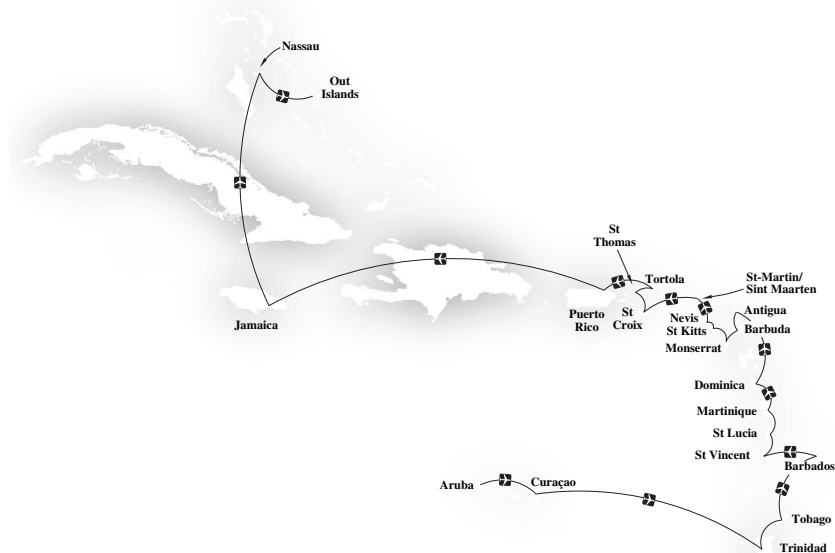
ULTIMATE ISLAND-HOPPING Three Weeks / Aruba to the Bahamas

You need your own yacht, your own plane or a handful of tickets to get around the Caribbean. Given that the full cost of the last one is still less than the monthly payment on the first two, it's probably the best option. Start in the resorts of **Aruba** (p780), then make the hop to **Curacao** (p799) for old Willemstad. Now it's on to Port-of-Spain, **Trinidad** (p732), followed by a trip to the natural beauty of **Tobago** (p754). Next up is **Barbados** (p675), with its mix of luxury and historic beauty, then cut west and have a banana at its source on **St Vincent** (p654).

Island-hop your way north via the secluded coves of **St Lucia** (p628), *très Française* **Martinique** (p603), and the waterfalls and wilds of **Dominica** (p580). Now make the jump to **Antigua** (p521), from where you can take a 20-minute flight to isolated, beautiful **Barbuda** (p531) before making the 20-minute trip to **Montserrat** (p540) and its active volcano. Now it's on to the perfect cone of **Nevis** (p506), followed by a chance to get spray in your face on the quick ferry to **St Kitts** (p499). From here it's 30 minutes to **St-Martin/Sint Maarten** (p434), with its awesome runway beach and bar.

Turn west for the authentic charms of the US Virgin Islands' **St Croix** (p377), followed by the duty-free horror of **St Thomas** (p362). Pop over to **Tortola** (p395) for the British version of the Virgin Islands. Now go to the airline hub of **Puerto Rico** (p324) and walk round for a bit in the pre-air-travel streets of Old San Juan. Trade Spanish charm for reggae vibes on a flight to **Jamaica** (p215). After time on the beaches, go north to **Nassau** (p66) in the Bahamas, from where you can take a trip to the **Out Islands** (p87).

This itinerary includes 19 flights and one short ferry ride. With advance-purchase airfares you should be able to do this trip for under US\$1500.



CUBA & THE CAYMANS

Three Weeks / Havana to Little Cayman

Why not combine one of the richest Caribbean countries with one of the poorest: a bastion of socialism with a citadel of capitalism? Think of it as economics 101 with beautiful beaches thrown in as extra credit.

Start your studies with architecture and music in **Havana** (p141), then head to **Santa Clara** (p165) and the venerable **Monumento Ernesto Che Guevara** (p165). Push on from here to **Trinidad** (p169), a Unesco World Heritage site. You can easily spend a week in this colonial town, hiking in **Topes de Collantes** (p170), horseback riding in **Valle de los Ingenios** (p170) or lazing at **Playa Ancón** (p170). Push east to **Santiago de Cuba** (p173) and its many attractions, including the **Castillo de San Pedro del Morro** (p175), the **Cuartel Moncada** (p174) and, of course, the vibrant music scene. Be sure to save at least two days for exploring in and around **Baracoa** (p180), one of Cuba's loveliest areas.

Return to Havana and fly to **Grand Cayman** (p196). You may have to connect through Montego Bay, Jamaica, but such are the vagaries of geopolitics. After flying into **George Town** (p196), base yourself at **Seven Mile Beach** (p196), which is backed by glitzy hotels and smart restaurants. After Cuba you may get a cultural hangover just being here. Go snorkeling at **Stingray City** (p199), where huge, fearless stingrays eat squid directly from your hands. Visiting **Cayman Brac** (p206) and **Little Cayman** (p208) require short flights. The former is the least visited of the Cayman Islands and by far the most dramatic, with great walking, bird-watching and diving. The latter has wonderful beaches and the best diving in the country.

You can cover the 861km between Havana and Santiago de Cuba in 15 hours in a rental car. On the Caymans, you'll have some flights but can otherwise use taxis and buses.



A BAHAMAS WAY OF LIFE Two to Four Weeks / Nassau to Eleuthera

Start off your Bahamian odyssey by spending three days in **Nassau** (p66), seeing sights such as **Cabbage Beach** (p76), before heading off to **Grand Bahama** (p77) for a few days of sandy pleasures. Go **diving** (p83) among the island's fish-filled coral reefs, or hike the mangrove trails in **Lucayan National Park** (p86).

Fly to Marsh Harbour on **Great Abaco** (p87), and relax on the exquisite beach on **Treasure Cay** (p89), before taking the ferry to **Green Turtle Cay** (p91) for a goombay smash at Miss Emily's Blue Bee Bar. On **Elbow Cay** (p90), wander streets lined with gingerbread fantasy houses, and admire the island's candy-striped lighthouse.

Fly to George Town on **Great Exuma** (p96) for some languid boat trips among the **Exuma Cays** (p98), a visit to **Stocking Island** (p97) and a snorkel around the captivating **Thunderball Grotto** (p98). Then head over to pretty **Long Island** (p102) for Gothic churches, lush greenery, blue holes and deserted beaches.

Finally, fly from Long Island's main settlement, Deadman's Cay, to Governor's Harbour on **Eleuthera** (p92) to see the beautiful people on chi-chi **Harbour Island** (p93), then head out to **Surfer's Beach** (p95) to watch the locals riding the waves while the sun goes down in the distance.

In under 900 miles of travel this trip takes you through the pleasures great and small of the vast series of islands known as the Bahamas. The big-city glitz of Nassau soon gives way to little towns of gingerbread houses and beaches of impossibly pure powder.



ROADS LESS TRAVELED

HUMPING HISPANIOLA Three Weeks / Santo Domingo to Port-au-Prince

Fish-shaped Hispaniola combines the up-and-coming Spanish-cultured Dominican Republic and the finally-on-its-way-up French-speaking Haiti.

Explore **Santo Domingo** (p284). Start with the **Zona Colonial** (p285), wandering 500-year-old cobblestone backstreets that have changed little since the 16th century. Now, it's time for the beach: **Bávaro** (p296) and **Punta Cana** (p296) have miles and miles of beautiful beach and organized beachfront fun, and are good bases for independent travel. Head to **Samaná** (p300) for whale-watching, then take the plunge at **Playa Frontón** (p304) for undisturbed snorkeling around some of the best reefs in the country. Climb up to the central highlands for **Jarabacoa** (p314), and then go north to **Cabarete** (p310) for some adventure tours.

Back in Santo Domingo, you can catch a bus to Haiti – it will take a day of your trip and spans a good bit of Hispaniola. Start in chaotic **Port-au-Prince** (p266), with its vibrant art scene, pulsing music and urban Vodou culture. Now chill out in the decaying grand architecture of **Jacmel** (p270), Haiti's craft and Carnival center. Head to **Parc National La Visite** (p270), where the mountain hiking is as good as the views, then take a flight north from Port-au-Prince to Cap-Haïtien to visit the **Citadelle** (p273). This is *the* tropical-mountain fortress in the Caribbean, and Haiti's – literally – big must-see. Through the journey you will want some beach time and Haiti's are not exactly packed. Consider the ones near **Cap-Haïtien** (p272), **Côte des Arcadins** (p270) or **Île-à-Vache** (p272). You can get flights out of Port-au-Prince when your Haitian adventure is over or return to Santo Domingo.

You can explore the hills, valleys, coast and towns of the Dominican Republic and Haiti entirely by public transportation. Bring a book and maybe chicken-proof pants – you'll not only have long hours on the road but you're likely to be pecked by a seatmate or two.



ISLANDS LESS VISITED**Two to Three Weeks / Dominica to Grenada**

Hopscotch your way south through some of the least-visited, least-developed Caribbean islands. Begin at **Dominica** (p580), which many people consider the wildest and most natural of the bunch. Start by getting on local time at the comfy properties of **Grand Bay** (p596). Then lose yourself in the rainforest at **Morne Trois Pitons National Park** (p595), a Unesco World Heritage site. Celebrate with a glass of bubbly – or at least the natural bubbles that tickle you while diving at **Champagne Reef** (p597).

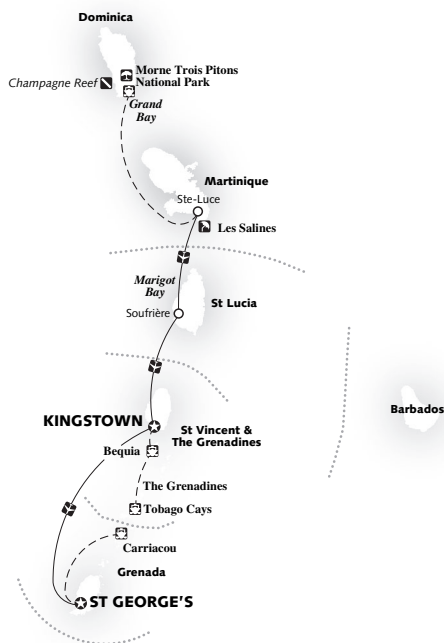
It's a quick hop to **Martinique** (p603), where you should hit the beach at **Les Salines** (p622), followed by diving and drinking in the lively fishing village of **Ste-Luce** (p620).

Skip the airport and take the scenic ferry to **St Lucia** (p628), which emerges like a virescent monolith from the Caribbean as you home in. Stay in **Soufrière** (p639), which has a dramatic position on a bay that's shadowed by the iconic peaks of the Pitons. You can hike these in the morning and dive in the afternoon. For a jaunt, head over to **Marigot Bay** (p638), with its small beach and beautiful surrounds.

Endless views of bananas trees are the reward of your quick flight to **St Vincent** (p654) – as you'll see while walking the streets of **Kingstown** (p654), the all-business capital, the fruit is the mainstay of the economy. Take the boat to **Bequia** (p660), the center of beach fun and nightlife in the Grenadines, then take a day trip to the **Tobago Cays** (p669).

Your last jump lands you at **Grenada** (p701), where **St George's** (p707) is a welcome respite from stodgy main towns. Stroll the waterfront and enjoy the buzz, then head out to **Carriacou** (p716), a pint-sized sister island with beautiful beaches, quiet streets and genial locals.

These islands are what many people envision when they plan a Caribbean trip: lush tropical scenery, craggy peaks and ribbons of untrammeled beaches. Then they get conned into a trip to St Thomas. Here's your chance to realize the dream.



TAILORED TRIPS

QUICK GETAWAY

You've had it, you need a weekend away. It's got to be warm, have a beach and a good place to get a rum punch, but it can't cost so much that all the good karma will end in tears when you see the credit-card bills at the end. The following islands can all be reached by nonstop flights from North American cities; the snow hits your butt as you leave, and the sun hits your face as you arrive. Going from west to east, consider these sun-soaked places.

Montego Bay (p239), Jamaica's most famous resort town, has a huge range of places to stay on fun-filled beaches, while the old town of **San Juan** (p328), the capital of Puerto Rico, has forts and nearby beaches to explore by day, and lively bar-lined streets you can wander by night. The island of **St-Martin/Sint Maarten** (p434) gives you the choice of a French frolic or Dutch treat, but you can actually enjoy both as you beach-hop this crazy-shaped island. **St Kitts** (p499) has some of the region's most-fun beach bars on some of the least-crowded beaches, and you can take a fun ferry for a day trip to gorgeous **Nevis** (p506). **Antigua** (p521) offers fine seafood dining, a dose of history and a seemingly endless supply of sandy places to swim and snorkel, while **St Lucia** (p628) allows you to forget civilization among its lush foliage and hidden beaches.



LUXE WEEK

There comes a time when the backpack needs to be forgotten, the bus saved for the airport parking lot and the only bubbles allowed in your glass must come from a cave in France. And the Caribbean is *the* place to do so. All easily reached from either North America or the UK, these are the spots for a sybaritic week amid the azure waters, blinding sands and every other Caribbean cliché that makes you tingle.

The **Cayman Islands** (p192) are among the most expensive islands in the Caribbean, and for good reason – there are a plethora of exclusive resorts here, ready to tend to your every whim. In the **Bahamas** (p59) you will find oodles of Boodles (the top brand of British gin) served at the kind of lavish places you see in swanky magazines that use thick paper, while **Tortola** (p395), in the British Virgin Islands, is the anchor – ha! – for the globe-trotting luxury-yacht set. The west coast of **Barbados** (p675), dubbed the 'Platinum Coast,' is lined with hidden resorts set in mansions previously owned by the fabulously wealthy expats who once wintered here. And, finally, **Mustique** (p664) in the Grenadines is the ultimate in posh – the few dozen lavish villas here are owned by the likes of Mick Jagger, but for the right price you can drop by.



HIDDEN CARIBBEAN

While more than 90% of the Caribbean's 7000 islands are minute and uninhabited, there's a little club of islands that are *almost* uninhabited. These are tiny places well off the tourist track that offer the kind of escape many dream of but rarely realize. Expect an adventurous trip to reach these destinations, and be sure to bring a bag of books for your lazy days.

Little Cayman (p208) has a population that barely cracks three figures – and that's the iguanas. Come here for some of the world's best wall diving. The nicknames of **Anegada** (p410) say it all: 'Mysterious Virgin' and 'Ghost Cay.' It's a remote bit of sand in the British Virgin Islands. Frigate birds outnumber humans at least 10 to one on **Barbuda** (p531), an island that's happy to remain in the shadow of Antigua. Some comfy beach cottages can only be reached by boat. **La Désirade** (p572) is the place to bone up on your French, as little English is spoken in this outpost of Guadeloupe; there are, however, miles of beaches untrod by human foot. Grenada isn't exactly on the beaten path, and **Petit Martinique** (p719) is almost unknown. The little beach here is just 10 minutes by foot from the guesthouses serving the island.



GREATER MOUNTAINS

The islands of the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Puerto Rico and Jamaica are part of the Greater Antilles (along with Cuba and the Caymans) and, among their few commonalities, is the fact that they share some of the Caribbean's most incredible mountains. On Puerto Rico, the 43-sq-mile Caribbean National Forest, more commonly known as **El Yunque** (p343) for its distinctive peak, has the island's only remaining virgin forest – some trees are more than 1000 years old. The Dominican Republic boasts a whopping 10 national parks, including **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** (p317) and **Parque Nacional José del Carmen Ramírez**, which is the home to **Pico Duarte** (p314), the Caribbean's tallest peak.

Neighboring Haiti has two mountain parks, **Parc National La Visite** (p270) and **Parc National Macaya** (p272), in which grows the country's remaining cloud forest.

Head west to Jamaica and you'll find the legendary **Blue Mountains** (p231), home to more than 500 species of flowering plants. The topography of the region is perfect for growing coffee beans, and the country's Blue Mountain coffee is often described as the best in the world.



Snapshots

HISTORY

Ahoy Arawaks

The first Caribbeans arrived on the islands closest to South America around 4000 BC. These nomadic hunter-gatherers were followed by waves of Arawaks (a collective term for the Amerindian people believed to be from the Orinoco River Delta around Venezuela and Guyana) who moved north and west, beginning the great tradition of Caribbean island-hopping. Indeed, one of the Caribbean's recurrent themes, from pre-Columbian times until right now, has been movement of peoples.

Around AD 1200 the peaceable Arawaks were happily farming, fishing and minding their own business when the Caribs from South America started fanning out over the Caribbean. The Caribs killed the Arawak men and enslaved the women, triggering another wave of migration that sent the Arawaks fleeing as far west as Cuba and as far north as the Bahamas. When the Spanish explorers arrived, they dubbed the warfaring people they encountered 'cannibals' (a derivation of the word 'caribal' or Carib), for their reputed penchant for eating their victims. Since the Arawaks had no written language, little of their culture survived, except – thankfully for weary travelers – the hammock.

Ahoy Columbus

Christopher Columbus led the European exploration of the region, making landfall at San Salvador in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492 – no matter that he thought he was in Asia. He too island-hopped, establishing the first European settlement in the Americas on Hispaniola, today shared by the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Discovering new lands gives glory, but what Columbus and subsequent explorers wanted was gold. Funny, though: despite four trips during which Columbus named and claimed much of the region for the Spanish crown, from Trinidad in the south to the Virgin Islands in the north, he never found much gold.

That's not to say there weren't riches: the land was fertile, the seas bountiful and the native population, after initial resistance by the toughest of the remaining Caribs, forcibly pliant. The conquistadores set to exploiting it all, violently. Focusing on the biggest islands promising the highest returns, they grabbed land, pillaged and enslaved, settling towns in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Jamaica.

Except for mineral-rich Trinidad, taken early by the Spanish, the Eastern Caribbean was left largely to its own devices until the English washed up on St Kitts in 1623, sparking domino-effect colonization of Barbados, Nevis, Antigua and Montserrat. Not to be outdone, the French followed, settling Martinique and Guadeloupe, while the Dutch laid claim to Saba, Sint Eustatius and St-Martin/Sint Maarten. Over the next 200 years the Europeans fought like children over these islands, and possession changed hands so often that a sort of hybridized culture developed; some islands, like St-Martin/Sint Maarten and St Kitts, were split between two colonial powers.

Pirates & Forts

The Caribbean colonial story is largely one of giant agricultural interests – most notably sugar, but also tobacco, cattle and bananas – fueled by greed and slavery that promoted power struggles between landowners, politicians and the pirates who robbed them. The Bahamas, with hundreds of

A Brief History of the Caribbean: From the Arawak and Carib to the Present by Jan Rogonizinski is readable but the 'brief' part is debatable: it's 432 pages.

On tiny little Saba if someone's last name is Johnson or Hassel, they're Saban through and through as those were the names of the first European families to settle there in the 1600s.

Everyone on St-Barthélemy wears some sort of jewelry with the vaguely V shape of the island on it.

In the Bahamas, Junkanoo is a street parade with music that people prepare for all year. It happens between Boxing Day (December 26) and New Year's Day.

The Banana Wars: United States Intervention in the Caribbean, 1898-1934 by Lester D Langley shows the cost of meddling in the region.

cays, complex shoals and channels, provided the perfect base for pirates such as Henry Jennings and 'Blackbeard' (Edward Teach) who ambushed treasure-laden boats headed for Europe. On the home front, Britain, Spain and France were embroiled in tiffs, scuffles and all-out war that allowed colonial holdings to change hands frequently. The English took Jamaica in 1655 and held Cuba momentarily in 1762, while the Spanish and French agreed to divide Hispaniola in 1731, creating the Dominican Republic and Haiti of today. The legacies of this period – Santo Domingo's Fortaleza Ozama (p288), the fortresses of Old San Juan (p331) and Havana (p144) and the vibrant mix of cultures – are among the most captivating attractions for travelers.

Except for the Eastern Caribbean, which has historically been more laid-back and easily controlled by its European overseers, colonial infighting had locals plotting rebellion and independence. Haiti was way in front of the curve in declaring independence in 1804, followed by the Dominican Republic in 1844 and Cuba in 1902. For some smaller islands – such as St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Barbuda and Antigua – the solution has been to band together. Other islands have opted to maintain strong neo-colonial ties to the parent country, as is the case with the French protectorates of St-Barthélemy, Martinique and Guadeloupe, and the commonwealth situation between Puerto Rico and the US. Independence on the one hand and statehood on the other has always had its champions in Puerto Rico, with statehood narrowly losing plebiscites in 1993 and 1998.

A different, but tenuous, alternative was forged by the Dutch holdings of Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire, Sint Maarten, Sint Eustatius and Saba. In 1954 these holdings became an autonomous federation under Dutch rule known as the Netherlands Antilles, though the charter stipulated that each was to eventually become independent. After a long lag since Aruba split first in 1986, the others are doing that now (see boxed text, p779).

A Rum-Punch Future

The last 100 years have been a mixed bag for the region. US intervention in countries seen as geostrategically important, particularly Haiti and Cuba, usually does more harm than good. Furthermore, monocrop agriculture – bananas in Jamaica, nutmeg in Grenada – means the islands are at the mercy of heavy weather and market fluctuations. At the same time, it polarizes societies into the rich who own the land and the poor who work it. This inevitably fosters socialist tendencies, including Fidel Castro, but also Maurice Bishop in Grenada (1979–83). Economic instability, especially, has given rise to dictators such as Rafael Leonidas Trujillo for 31 years in the Dominican Republic and the Duvaliers (Papa and Baby Doc) for 29 years in Haiti.

One thing all the islands have in common is tourism, which began taking hold when other sectors of the islands' economies began to crumble, particularly agriculture. Crop-leveling hurricanes (eg Gilbert in 1988, Hugo in 1989) spurred some islands to develop tourism industries, while the 1997 World Trade Organization ruling favoring Central American bananas over Caribbean ones forced St Vincent and Martinique to look at diversifying. Far from a panacea, unfettered tourism can wreak havoc on the environment (see p49) or give rise to societal woes like prostitution in Cuba. But overall the perception that tourism is a good source of jobs and revenue is widespread. In a recent poll, people in places as diverse as Trinidad and Barbados overwhelmingly said they not only liked tourists but said their presence made everybody's life better. Of course that poll may have been taken when Brobdingnagian cruise ships *weren't* in port.

But like a sacking of an agrarian village by pirates, this summary makes short work of the Caribbean's complex story. Each island's particular history is more complex and nuanced; see individual chapters for the full scoop.

PEOPLE

The stereotypical island slacker, swinging in a hammock with joint in hand, couldn't be further from the truth in today's Caribbean. On most islands, economic necessity or outright hardship means working in the fields, factory or hotel in a constant effort to make ends meet. Family is the hub on which life turns and interpersonal relationships make the day-to-day fun and purposeful. Gossiping is a major hobby. Casual with time and commitments, many islanders prefer to converse with a friend over one last beer than rush to catch a bus. In the villages away from big cities and on the small islands everyone knows each other.

Chivalrous at best, misogynistic at worst, machismo is a complex cultural phenomenon on many islands like Trinidad. Far from the simple domination of women – indeed, some social scientists argue, convincingly, that it's really the women holding the reins in these societies – machismo embraces many facets of the human condition including emotional vulnerability and virility. It can also manifest itself in homophobia, which has reached alarming, virulent proportions on some islands and especially Jamaica, where it is endemic and violent.

Health is a perennial challenge for the region. According to UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations program on HIV/AIDS), the Caribbean has the second-highest rate of adult HIV infection (2.3%) after sub-Saharan Africa. Although some countries including Barbados, the Bahamas and Cuba have had success in lowering infection rates, in other places such as Jamaica, rates of infection are reaching crisis proportions. For more information, see p840.

Another simmering issue is immigration: Dominicans sailing to Puerto Rico, boatfuls of Haitians alighting in the Bahamas and Cubans floating around the Florida Straits are common images. The land of opportunity, of course, is the US, which maintains a politically driven immigration policy that grants disgruntled Cubans automatic residency, but regularly turns away desperate Haitians. Those left behind on Haiti are poor but proud. They're well aware that most of the world thinks they're boat people from a land of dictators, chaos and zombies; so they're eager to show foreigners that the reality is far different.

Aside from the Carib reservation on Dominica of some 3000, little vestige of the original inhabitants remains in the Caribbean. Instead, there is the complex swirl of cultures and colors from all the people who came after: English, Spanish, French and Dutch mixed with Africans brought over as slaves. Once slavery was abolished, indentured laborers came from China, India and the Middle East, changing islands' identities. Regional immigration also adds to the mix: 'Bahatians' – Haitians born in the Bahamas – are recognized (and often discriminated against) as a separate group, and expats from the US have altered the makeup of some islands like the Caymans.

SPORTS

You need only ask 'cricket or baseball?' to get your finger on the pulse. Closest to the US, baseball rules in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, with players by the dozens making the jump to the US big leagues. Catching a game in Cuba or the Dominican Republic is a window into the sport as a local passion.

Cricket is serious business in the Caribbean, where rivalries (and fans) are rabid and the sport attracts major dollars. Islands where cricket rules include

Arubans take their license plate motto seriously: 'One Happy Island.' They really believe it.

St-Martin/Sint Maarten is the Caribbean melting pot. Besides French and Dutch, the two-nation island has residents from over 80 other countries.

On Guadeloupe the Tour de Guadeloupe bicycle race is the Caribbean Tour de France.

GET OUT OF YOUR SHELL

You can't begin to experience the Caribbean until you get to know its people. And that doesn't just mean the guy mixing the rum-punch or the woman handing you a conch fritter – although these folks are often fascinating in their own right. (People who run beach bars out of shacks on the sand easily have the highest average character quotient anywhere.)

Rather, to meet the locals you need to join the locals; something that often doesn't happen when you're in a whirlwind of package tours, resort-style ghettos and general frolic-filled days. Here are some simple, common-sense tips from the authors of this book for getting past the smiles of the tourist industry and experiencing the culture of the islands.

- Eat at lunch wagons or stalls. The food is cheap and you often get incredibly good local fare that hasn't been watered down for foreign palettes. Plus you can break the ice just by asking what's what.
- Drop by a local bar for a drink. It's perhaps not best for single women, but rum shops on places like Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao are the de facto community centers and you'll soon be part of the crowd.
- Be loyal. So many tourists blow through just once so if the folks in a café or bar think you're a regular (sometimes it takes but two visits), you'll be part of the crew.
- Look for community fish fries or barbecues. Typically held once a week, they're big street parties in the Eastern Caribbean, especially Barbados.
- Pick up people trudging along the road (hitchhiking is rare, so offer a lift to someone who needs it). We learned the drama-filled history of the sugar industry on St Kitts by giving a lift to a teacher late for class.
- Take the bus – locals love to show you their country and will go out of their way to show you things while you bounce down the road (and the jammed conditions of most buses mean you can't help but meet people).
- Be friendly, say hi. A no-brainer but why wait for others to welcome you? icy resolve can melt when you make the first move.

Jamaica, the Leeward and Windward Islands, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago, and while there are no national clubs, the top players from these countries form the storied West Indies team. The 2007 Cricket World Cup was played across the Caribbean, with nations spending big sums on new and improved stadiums. Unfortunately for the West Indies team, it got as far as the Super 8, only to be eliminated in losses that included a brutal 103-run defeat by Australia. (Australia went on to win the cup.)

While volleyball (especially the beach variety) and soccer are popular in the Caribbean, basketball just seems to grow in popularity. Puerto Rico and Cuba have leagues and players regularly make the jump to the NBA, following in the size-15 footsteps of superstars Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Trinidadian descent), Patrick Ewing (Jamaica) and Tim Duncan (Bahamas).

In the Olympics, you'll have noticed that folks from the Caribbean run *fast*. Tiny island countries regularly gain honors at the games through their runners. Famed sprinter Kim Collins, 'the Fastest Man on Earth,' hails from St Kitts, where you'll drive along Kim Collins Hwy.

Windsurfing and board surfing have become part of the culture in Barbados, Bonaire and other places where the wind and waves allow for world-class competitions.

And yachts aren't just for the idle rich. Huge regattas draw teams of locals and foreigners in fierce competitions. Famous races include Sailing Week on Antigua, the Heineken Regatta on St-Martin/Sint Maarten, the Rolex Cup on St Thomas, USVI, the BVI Spring Regatta on Tortola and the Tour des

For some of the world's most raucous baseball, catch a game in Santo Domingo and San Pedro de Macoris on the Dominican Republic.

Bone up on batsmen, bowlers and sticky wickets at www.windiescricket.com or www.caribbeancricket.com.

Yoles Rondes on Martinique. On Anguilla, local teams compete with their own home-grown designs.

RELIGION

It's quite probable that every religion known to, well, God is practiced somewhere in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, Christian religions are still the classic forces on islands with a strong European heritage. Animist sects (obeah) have strongholds in Jamaica, the Bahamas and the Eastern Caribbean. Meanwhile evangelical sects are attracting scores with the promise of a peaceful afterlife that appeals to those fed up with the violence and destruction of the here and now.

Yet the islands are most closely identified with Afro-Caribbean religions like Vodou in Haiti and Santería in Cuba. These religions trace their roots to Africa, but were overlain and mixed with Christian trappings when the slaves were brought over. Masking tribal beliefs and traditions with those of the overseers ensured the survival of these religions. As they say on Haiti, the people are '80% Catholic, 20% Protestant and 100% Vodou.'

Rastafarianism was promulgated by Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie whom Rastas regarded as the Chosen One. The religion sprouted from Marcus Garvey's 'back to Africa' movement in the '30s, but gained worldwide exposure thanks to spliff-smoking, dreadlocked adherents like Bob Marley who believe that Africans are the 13th lost tribe of Israel and that they will be led from exile in Babylon (Jamaica) to Zion or the 'Promised Land' (Ethiopia) by Jah (God). In Jamaica, some 100,000 claim Rastafarianism as their religion and you'll find scores of Rastas throughout the islands.

ARTS

The list of Caribbean literary giants is so long, your on-the-road reading could comprise only local writers. See p30 for some notable examples; you'll also find more in the island chapters throughout this book.

You'll find a rich artistic culture on most of the islands, although you may have to peer past tourist-schlock to find it. Misunderstood Haiti is a perfect example. The Haitian Naïve painters of the 1940s and 1950s (such as Hector Hyppolite) were internationally significant, changing Europe and America's idea of Caribbean and African art. The modern generation continues to build on those strong foundations and some of the best works you'll find in galleries on islands far away are by Haitian artists.

No matter the medium, Cuba is an artistic powerhouse: the paintings of Wilfredo Lam, the films of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (*Death of a Bureaucrat*; *Memories of Underdevelopment*), the National Ballet of Cuba and the indelible images shot by Korda – including the Che you see peddled worldwide – are testament to artistic achievement. The Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, both with arts schools, have a rich arts scene as well. Perhaps the most celebrated Caribbean painter is impressionist Camille Pissarro, born on St Thomas in 1803 and known for his landscapes.

Throughout the islands, you'll see clothes and costumes inspired by the flamboyance and sheer glitter that come from Carnival. It is the climax of the social calendar for rich and poor alike across the Caribbean.

MUSIC

You're on a beach and you're listening to Bob Marley blaring out of the sound system of the bar that just sold you a cold one. You're in Jamaica, right? Maybe. In fact you could be on any warm beach on earth, so pervasive has Marley become around the world. It's been more than 25 years

From Cuba's all-male secret societies to the ganja-puffing rituals of Rastafarians, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* by Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizbeth Paravisini-Gebert is one of the most current and comprehensive treatments of the region's religions.

The 'Lace Ladies' gather at the Eugenius Centre on Thursdays to do beautiful Saban stitching. These women are pushing 100 years old and are oh-so charming!

Many 'local' crafts sold in tourist areas are from China. Look for places like Festival Place in Nassau, where everything is Bahamian made.

since he died but at any given moment his songs must be playing in thousands of sandy-floored beach joints worldwide.

That very image of laid-back reggae drives tourism on Jamaica and it's created a clichéd image of Caribbean torpor that is firmly stamped into the world's consciousness. But even as people sway to 'Could You Be Loved' they may have the sexy strains of Rihanna singing 'Umbrella' on their iPod or the jamming strains of Arrow's 'Hot Hot Hot' on the CD player in their traffic-bound car.

Although each island has its own musical style, all Caribbean music is percussion-based, born as a lingua franca from Africans confronting their new, nightmarish reality where music formed one of the few links to their mostly lost cultures (religion was the other). It's unsurprising that European and North American styles eventually began to infuse Caribbean rhythms. Thematically, sociopolitical commentary/criticism has always been a vital undercurrent but so too has sex – you'll hear lots of salacious rhythms and raunchy rhymes permeating the Caribbean airwaves.

Calypso

Born in 19th-century Trinidad and Tobago among field hands who sang in French Creole to obscure the lyrics' meaning from the landowners, calypso continues to rely on clever wordplay (though now in English), and the Carnival competitions are a hot highlight. Calypso – too great a tradition to remain contained – eventually spawned soca, the high-energy mix of soul and calypso. These islands are also the birthplace of the steel drum.

Reggae

With Jamaica as its fountainhead, reggae is driven by a kicking drum bass after-beat and is literally heard everywhere. Reggae lyrics traditionally addressed problems facing Jamaica's urban poor, including discrimination and marginalization, while also projecting self-affirmation. The reggae pantheon includes Peter Tosh and Bunny Livingston (with Marley, the original Wailers), Jimmy Cliff, the legendary producer Lee 'Scratch' Perry and Burning Spear.

Newer Styles

Dancehall – a raw, cheap-to-produce genre that's like the bastard child of a Rasta and gangsta rapper – incorporates lewd lyrics with ghetto angst that created a whole new musical royalty in Jamaica including Yellowman, producers Sly & Robbie and Shabba Ranks (with his self-explanatory 'Hard and Stiff').

Salsa and its offshoots burn up dance floors from San Juan to Santo Domingo, which sizzle with salsa's up-tempo beat, sassy brass and smokin' rhythm sections. It's hit big with Puerto Rican superstars such as Eddie Palmieri and Cuban bands like Los Van Van and NG La Banda.

And the scene, like a good Creole stew, just keeps changing as new forms blend old styles. Latino immigrants on Caribbean islands are creating a new soca/salsa twist, while Creole hip-hop is heard from New York to Rio. Dancehall, *the* style of local clubs throughout the region, has DJs adding vocals to raw rhythms. And reggaeton adds reggae strains to the driving dancehall beat.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

You will see two main types of islands in the Caribbean: limestone and volcanic. This can directly affect your traveling experience. Limestone islands were formed by living coral forming layers of limestone that built up over

The classic reggae drama is *The Harder They Come*, starring Jimmy Cliff, but fans shouldn't miss *The Reggae Movie*, chock-full of concert footage from Burning Spear, Inner Circle, Ziggy Marley and more.

Dancehall Reggae (www.dancehallreggae.com) is the place to go for the latest on Jamaica's trend-setting music scene.

The film *Buena Vista Social Club* and its soundtrack continue to drive interest in 1950s Cuban dancehall music even as the island itself has moved far beyond in its tastes.

millions of years. In fact the islands look organic; one needs only see the Byzantine shapes of the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, and Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao to understand that these were formed by complex processes (St-Martin/Sint Maarten looks like something left by a bird). The islands have rolling interiors but their real allure is the crenellated coasts, which can provide ideal shelter for boats and which are lined with countless beaches with brilliant white or even pinkish sand from the coral.

Volcanic islands form a crescent from Saba to Grenada. Although most are dormant, there are still eruptions: Martinique (Mt Pelée, 1902), St Vincent (Soufrière volcano, 1979) and Montserrat, whose Soufrière Hills volcano has devastated much of the island in a series of eruptions since 1995. Volcanic islands typically have one or more tall cones that drop steeply down to flatter lands near the coast. The nearly perfect conical shape of Nevis is a good example. The upper reaches of the peaks often still have swaths of rainfor-

Keep track of who is sleeping with whom and who is the latest reggaeton sensation at caribbeancelebrity.com.

CARIBBEAN GEOGRAPHY 101

You will often hear the Caribbean islands referred to in numerous ways – the Leewards, the Windwards, the West Indies etc. It can get confusing, so here's a quick primer in Caribbean geography.

- Caribbean islands – An archipelago of thousands of islands that stretch from the southeast coast of Florida in the USA to the northern coast of Venezuela. The largest island within the Caribbean Sea is Cuba, followed by the island of Hispaniola (shared by the nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic), then Jamaica and Puerto Rico. The Bahamas, to the north, are technically outside of the Caribbean archipelago – although we have covered them in this book.
- Greater Antilles – Consists of the large islands such as Hispaniola, Cuba and Jamaica at the top of the Caribbean and goes east as far as Puerto Rico. It also includes the Cayman Islands, due to their western location.
- Lesser Antilles – The archipelago that extends east and southeastward from the Virgin Islands down to Trinidad and Tobago, just off the northern coast of Venezuela. Also called the Eastern Caribbean Islands, the Lesser Antilles are further divided into the Leeward Islands and the Windward Islands.
- Leeward Islands – From north to south: the US Virgin Islands (USVI), the British Virgin Islands (BVI), Anguilla, St-Martin/Sint Maarten, St-Barthélemy, Saba, Sint Eustatius (Statia), St Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat, and Guadeloupe.
- Windward Islands – From north to south: Dominica, Martinique, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Grenada. Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago are often geographically considered part of the Windwards, but do not belong to the Windward Islands geopolitical group.

The islands are further classified by their national sovereignty.

- British West Indies – Consists of Anguilla, Turks and Caicos, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat (an 'overseas territory') and BVI (a crown colony) due to their affiliation with the UK.
- French West Indies – Includes Guadeloupe, St-Martin, St-Barthélemy and Martinique due to their status as Départments d'Outre-Mer of France.
- Netherlands Antilles – Historically Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire, Sint Maarten, Saba and Sint Eustatius. Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao (often called the ABC Islands) are also known as the Leeward Netherlands Antilles. (The word 'former' was added to Netherlands Antilles in 2008; see p779.)

For our purposes, we've called the whole wonderful affair the Caribbean islands, but you'll see the other terms peppered throughout the text.

Treasure Island supposedly was about BVI's Norman Island.

est that proved too difficult to clear during the plantation era. The coasts generally lack the intricate curves and inlets of the limestone islands, which means natural ports are uncommon. Beaches can be dark volcanic sand but also bright white from offshore reefs.

To understand your windward from your leeward and get a firm grasp of your Antilles, see the boxed text, p47.

Wildlife

ANIMALS

Except for large iguana populations and tree rats on certain islands, land animals have largely been hunted to extinction. Responsibility is shared between humans and other introduced species including the mongoose, raccoons, cats, dogs and donkeys. Trinidad, home to 100 types of mammal, is the exception to the rule (see p731).

If you're anxious to behold the Caribbean's richest fauna, you're going to get wet. One of the world's most complex ecosystems is coral, a diminutive animal that lives in giant colonies that form over millennia. Fish pecking away at nutritious tidbits or hiding out in the reef include the iridescent Creole wrasse, groupers, kingfish, sergeant majors and angel fish. Hang – or float – around and you might see inflatable porcupine fish, barracudas, nurse sharks, octopus, moray eels and manta rays. See p52 for the region's best diving and below for details on the grave threats to reefs.

Other species you may see include pilot, sperm, blue and humpback whales, famous for their acrobatic breaching from January to March. Spinner, spotted and bottlenosed dolphins, and loggerhead, green, hawksbill and leatherback turtles are common sights for divers. Manatees or sea cows, herbivorous marine mammals so ugly they're cute, are found in waters around Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. All of

James Bond loves the Caribbean; films shot there include *Dr No* (Jamaica), *Thunderball* (Bahamas), *Live and Let Die* (Jamaica) *Golden Eye* (Puerto Rico) and *Casino Royale* (Bahamas). And Sean Connery lives in the Bahamas.

IMPERILED REEFS

More than half of the reefs in the Caribbean are dead or dying and the rest are severely threatened, according to a several recent scientific reports. The culprits are the usual suspects: global warming, population growth, overfishing and hurricanes. The findings explain the threats as follows:

- Global warming – The record temperatures of water across the Caribbean are killing beneficial types of algae that corals depend on symbiotically to survive, which results in the process called 'bleaching.' Higher carbon dioxide levels also deprive reefs of oxygen, and coral is highly susceptible to even slight reductions in oxygen.
- Population growth – Development along coasts increases the runoff of soil, which clouds the water and denies coral sunlight. Population growth also means increased agricultural activity – not only farms but also golf courses and other artificial plantings. Chemical runoffs contain poisons as well as nutrients that are used by harmful algae that destroy the reefs.
- Overfishing – While harmful algae have always been present in reefs, one of the forces keeping them in check were algae-eating fish. The greatly reduced numbers of fish in the region mean that harmful algae are thriving.
- Hurricanes – The record number of hurricanes are depriving the reefs of oxygen through turbulent waters that block sunlight; damage to land that increases soil runoff; and wave forces that already-weakened reefs cannot handle.

Experts familiar with Caribbean reefs say that it may already be too late save a lot of them but that with immediate action it might be possible. Although hard to calculate due to the sheer magnitude of the numbers, it's estimated that reefs provide over \$4 billion in value to the Caribbean through shoreline protection and tourism, and as a habitat for sea creatures.

these animals are on the threatened or endangered species list – part of the reason the Bahamas and other islands like Curaçao are criticized for their captive dolphin facilities.

Hundreds of bird species, both endemic and migratory, frequent scores of islands. Look for iconic pink flamingos on the Bahamas and Bonaire. Common Caribbean seabirds include brown pelicans, white cattle egrets and herons. Hummingbirds and banana quits are always around, searching for something sweet.

PLANTS

The Caribbean has thousands of plant species. The tropics in bloom feel like an epiphany and you'll see flowering trees such as the orange flamboyant, crimson African tulip (*spathodea*), white frangipani with its intoxicating scent, and the dark-blue blossoms of the lignum vitae, the hardest of all known woods. Hundreds of orchid species bejewel damper areas (best January to March), and vermilion bougainvillea, exotic birds of paradise, hibiscus of all colors and spiky crimson ginger pop up everywhere.

Environmental Issues

The sheer popularity of the region as a destination creates or aggravates environmental problems. Specific sites suffering from overexposure include the reef around Tobago Cays off St Vincent and the Grenadines, a popular anchorage for sailors, and the reefs around the Virgin Islands, which have been damaged by careless snorkelers and divers.

Waste is a big problem. Mountains of garbage crowd Havana, acrid refuse burns from Vieques to Puerto Plata, and sewage needs somewhere to go – too often into the sea, unfortunately. St-Barthélemy is one island finding creative answers such as converting burning trash into energy.

Larger islands, in particular, have had difficulty inculcating a culture of conservation. Despite deforestation laws, only 10% of the Dominican Republic is forested. Neighboring Haiti – the most impoverished country in the western hemisphere – features in university environmental-management courses as a case study in how massive deforestation (95%) can destroy a country.

Overfishing is a major problem. The Bahamas outlawed long-line fishing in 1959, the first Caribbean island to do so, but now struggles with poachers; some communities have established marine preserves independently of the government to curb the abuse. In June 1997 an environmental scandal surfaced involving Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent, St Lucia, and Dominica, which were accused of taking bribes from Japan in exchange for helping block protection measures for endangered species.

Nevertheless, no legislation or vigilance can stop the environmental destruction wrought by a hurricane that indiscriminately uproots trees and clogs reefs, and the number of destructive hurricanes is growing. In 2007 two Category 5 hurricanes – the strongest – both made landfall in the region, a first.

FOOD & DRINK

Caribbean cuisine blends fruits and rice, seafood and spice. And it blends influences from around the world. Indian, French, Italian, American and Asian influences are just some of the tastes and flavors you'll find. But don't expect every meal to be a feast of tropical flavors. Visitors can run into bland, dull food everywhere. From the hotel dining room slipping meat and two veg in front of you to bland buffets at all-inclusive resorts, there's plenty of reason to seek out the best of the region. It's not hard to find.

The sight of thousands of frigate birds puffing out their distinctive scarlet throat pouches in hopes of luring a mate on Barbuda is one of nature's great spectacles.

Sweet Hands: Island Cooking from Trinidad and Tobago by Ramin Ganeshram is a good cookbook specializing in TnT dishes.

A regionwide delicacy called 'mountain chicken' is no kind of fowl, but is actually a crapaud, a local species of frog with unusually large (and delicious) legs; it's a protected species and only to be caught between September and February.

Staples & Specialties

A fish still dripping with salt water, thrown on the grill and spritzed with lime has made many a Caribbean travel memory. So too has a tasty lobster, grilled over colts and then drenched in garlic butter. Most islands have a pickled fish dish (*escovitché* or *escobèche*), a jazzy marinade of vinegar, lime and spices with a complexity belied by the simple ingredients. In the Bahamas, conch (pronounced 'conk') is so popular any which way – pounded, marinated and frittered, deep fried, grilled, in salad, chowders and stews – the animal is headed towards the threatened species list.

As for meat, there's the ubiquitous chicken. Mixed with rice it's found as *arroz con pollo* in the Spanish-speaking islands and as chicken *pelau* in Trinidad and St Vincent. The other omnipresent staple is pork, which is the star meat in Cuban and Puerto Rican sandwiches (*lechón asado*). Beef is not eaten widely, except in Jamaica. Goat is a staple on many of the Leeward Islands, including Montserrat, where it stars in a savory dish with an unsavory name: goat water.

Look for Creole food, the classic French-inspired spicy, tomatoey fare that is found on menus through the Eastern Caribbean and north all the way to New Orleans.

Rice flecked with black or red beans is a staple in the Bahamas, Cuba (*congrí*), Jamaica (rice and peas) and Trinidad, where aromatic basmati rice subs in for the traditional long grain. Cassava (yucca) is served with an addictive garlic sauce called *mojito* in Cuba and *ajili-mójili* in Puerto Rico. Plantains are a staple and accompany every meal fried as chips or as disks (*tostones*).

Tropical fruits are quintessential Caribbean icons. There are the usual pineapple, papaya, bananas, guava and mango, but mix it up some, sampling sugar apple in the Bahamas (*anon* in Cuba), a custardy fruit shot through with black pits, or *guinep* in Jamaica, a small lychee-like fruit.

The king and queen of Caribbean street snacks are the patty (flaky pastry pillows filled with meat) for which Jamaica is famous, and the roti, an eastern Indian creation of flatbread wrapped around curried meat or potatoes, served widely in the Caribbean, but particularly in Trinidad.

Look for salted plantain chips sold in bags as snacks for bus journeys.

There are at least 12 kinds of mango widely sold through the Caribbean.

MEMORABLE EATING & DRINKING

Here are some of the more memorable experiences authors of this book had in pursuit of good food and fun.

- Curried shrimp – a local dish on Statia – at a place called Fruit Tree (p485), a hidden local haunt. (Brandon Presser, Sint Eustatius)
- Pataraj (p743) in Port of Spain has the most delicious shrimp roti served with pickled mango, pumpkin, and pepper. I'd go back for the tender sweet papaya flesh and the tangy pineapple from the markets that I cut into almost daily. (Ellee Thalheimer, Trinidad and Tobago)
- The jerk chicken and pork in Boston Bay (p234) was absolutely sensational – the seasoning fiery enough without overwhelming the meat. (Richard Koss, Jamaica)
- On Antigua at Coconut Grove (p526), for the first time in my life I enjoyed rock lobster when I wasn't flat on my back with my feet in the air barking like a dogfish to the B-52s. (Ryan Ver Berkmoes, Antigua and Barbuda)
- The awesome goombay smash at Miss Emily's Blue Bee Bar (p92), where it was created. Poured from a gallon jug into your cup, it is sneaky potent. (Amy C Balfour, the Bahamas)
- Getting nice and buzzed on my back porch with a friend in Dominica. We bought a bottle of cheap rum and some fruit juice, and went to town. (Josh Krist, Dominica)

SUNNY, YUMMY, RUMMY *Josh Krist*

If you could taste them, what would sunsets and long days at the beach taste like? Most likely, rum. In a daiquiri, by itself, or with sugar and a slice of lime, rum is *the* drink of the Caribbean.

In Puerto Rico, the Bacardi Rum Factory (p342) is a good introduction to rum production – fermenting mashed sugar cane or molasses in huge vats, capturing the alcohol through distillation, aging it in wooden casks in big hot warehouses – and there are free tastings.

Distillers explain that because of the warm Caribbean climate up to 15% of the rum evaporates every year during aging. This evaporation is called ‘the angel’s share’ at distilleries around the world and usually averages closer to 5%. The angels in the Caribbean are living it up, apparently.

Sip a little something at the Cruzan Rum Distillery (p383); it has a pleasant 20-minute tour with tastings at the end.

Some say that Cuban rum is the best. Do some investigation at Havana’s Museo del Ron (p145), where in addition to the usual tour and tasting there’s a re-creation of a traditional distillery, complete with a model railway.

The Appleton Rum Estate (p252) has the largest and oldest distillery in Jamaica – it’s been pumping out the good stuff since 1749. Appleton is probably the local favorite across the region.

Martinique is the epicenter of high-quality, pure-cane rums, which they call *rhum agricole*. There are many distilleries on this French island, but English speakers will learn the most at Musée du Rhum St James (p616).

Top rums include Bermudez Anniversario from the Dominican Republic, Haiti’s Barbancourt Five Star and Mount Gay Extra Old from Barbados (see p683). The color of rum ranges from clear to honey brown. The darker the drink, the older, usually. Unlike Scotch, however, older does not necessarily equal better, especially considering that some distilleries add coloring and fresh product to the casks for ‘aged rum’ because of the thirsty angels.

Let taste be your guide; take a small sniff of straight rum with your mouth slightly open. This gives you an idea of the taste without being overwhelmed by the alcohol burn. In the better rums you might smell some vanilla, a hint of flowers, or even, oddly enough, cotton candy – it is just cooked sugar that soaked up the flavors of sun-warmed casks, after all.

On islands that see a fair number of visitors, like Barbados, the Caymans, Aruba and many more, look for wonderful restaurants run by creative chefs who are melding the region’s foods and flavors with those of the world.

Drinks

The Caribbean and drinks. Reasons to pack your bag now. Minty mojitos or lemony daiquiris in Cuba, sugary ti-punch in Martinique or the smooth and fruity goombay smash in the Bahamas. It’s no surprise that all of these are rum drinks: the Caribbean makes the world’s best rum, and while some venture no further than a regular old Cuba *libre* (rum and Coke) or piña colada, a highball of exquisite seven-year-old *añejo* over ice as the sun sets is liquid joy. See boxed text, above.

Beer is like bottled water, no it is the bottled water. Red Stripe from Jamaica and Carib from Trinidad and Tobago have earned global reputations. Numerous more regional lagers keep you cool during the hot days and nights.

Along with rum, the Caribbean produces some of the world’s finest coffee. Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee needs no introduction, while Haitian Bleu (named for its color) is sought out for its dark roasted flavor and organic origins. Cuba also grows organic coffee, usually served strong, black and sweet or as silky, milky *café con leche*, which is also how they prefer it in Puerto Rico. Coconut water sipped fresh from the nut is refreshing and light – perfect on a hot day.

Mamajuana is a bottle filled with a variety of herbs and dried bark topped with rum, wine and a bit of honey, then allowed to steep for around a month. Most Dominican bars have a bottle somewhere.

Visitors from stodgier places are always amazed you can take your drink from a bar in a to-go cup on many Caribbean islands. Then they join right in.

Diving & Snorkeling

Whether you're an ultraexperienced diver or a novice slapping on fins for the first time, you are in for a real treat. Few places in the world offer such perfect conditions for underwater exploration. The Caribbean Sea's consistently warm waters – year-round temperatures average a comfortable 80°F (27°C) – and spectacularly clear waters mean visibility can exceed 100ft (30m). Professional dive operators are as prolific as the postcard-worthy beaches and, whether you plunge the surface or plunge far below, the colorful, active marine world delivers an amazing show.

The variety of islands – from lush and mountainous to arid and flat – mean the diversity of dive sites is almost endless. You'll find shallow fringing reefs that curve into protected bays, sheer walls and coral-covered pinnacles, exciting drift dives, and remnants of ancient shipwrecks that lie as historical relics on the sea floor.

You can come face-to-face with fish the size of small cars, or moray eels longer than your wingspan. You can peer into sea grass and find tiny sea-horses, or watch translucent shrimp scratch along the coral. Caribbean waters harbor all sorts of colorful sponges, and both soft and hard coral, including wavering gorgonian fans and gemlike black coral.

At the end of the day, there's nothing better than sipping a cold beer while the sun licks the beads of water off your skin. You'll think about the turtle you just met – that's one traveling friend you will never, ever forget.

INFORMATION

Books

Comprehensive guides that give good descriptions of both scuba diving and snorkeling sites, along with information on local dive operators, include the much-revered *Best Dives of the Caribbean* by Joyce Huber, and *The Complete Diving Guide: The Caribbean* series by Colleen Ryan and Brian Savage. Lonely Planet's Diving & Snorkeling series includes guides to Bonaire, Cayman Islands and the US Virgin Islands. Anyone curious about marine biology should check out Paul Humann's series on fish, coral and invertebrate identification. Titles include *Reef Fish Identification: Tropical Pacific* and *Reef Creature Identification: Florida Caribbean Bahamas*. Budding underwater naturalists will also want to arm themselves with *Scuba Dic.: Caribbean Sea*, a nifty underwater dictionary – printed on waterproof paper – detailing a variety of fish, plants and invertebrates, with corresponding photos.

Dive Courses

With warm, calm, crystalline waters, the Caribbean is an excellent place to get scuba certified or further your training with specialized courses, such as night, wreck or deep diving, or digital underwater photography. Two reputable organizations are widely recognized as providing the best and most professional certification in the world: the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) and the National Association of Underwater Instructors (NAUI). Affiliation with either of these organizations means the dive shop adheres to high standards of safety and professionalism. Avoid unaffiliated operators; the lower cost can be alluring, but it often means dodgy service, old equipment and compromised safety.

If you want to experience diving for the first time, most operators offer a short beginner course for nondivers, commonly dubbed a 'resort course,' which includes brief instructions, followed by a shallow beach or boat dive.

The Caribbean Sea is the world's fifth-largest body of water, just slightly bigger than the Mediterranean Sea.

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR DIVING

Before embarking on a scuba-diving, skin-diving or snorkeling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience.

- Possess a current diving certification card from a recognized scuba diving instructional agency (if scuba diving).
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or divemaster.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local trained divers deal with these considerations.

The cost generally ranges from US\$75 to US\$125, depending on the operation and whether a boat is used.

For those who want to jump into the sport wholeheartedly, a number of operators offer full open-water certification courses. The cost generally hovers around US\$400, equipment included, and the course takes the better part of a week. If you plan to be certified but don't want to spend your vacation in a classroom, consider a 'warm-water referral' program, where you take the classes at home, then complete your open-water dives in the Caribbean.

Dive Operators

Excellent dive operators abound, offering everything from snorkeling rentals to full dive-certification courses. Reputable operators make safety a huge priority and they will help you determine the best sites to suit your experience and comfort level. Divemasters can also be excellent island resources, with information on everything from secret snorkel spots to the best beach bars. See the individual island chapters for listings of recommended dive operators.

Dive Tours

Several companies offer dive trips that include all hotel and diving costs. Live-aboards are big yachts outfitted for a group of divers. Passengers sleep and eat meals on board, and spend days doing multiple dives. Both land-based dive tours and live-aboards offer a unique way to become immersed in the sport and meet other divers (who tend, incidentally, to be a social lot). Rates for week-long, land-based tours in the high season range from US\$600 to US\$1200. Live-aboard trips range from around US\$1400 to US\$2200 for seven nights. Prices are based on double occupancy and do not include airfare.

LAND-BASED TOURS

PADI Travel Network (☎ 800-729-7234; www.padi.com) The PADI organization runs dive package tours at destinations throughout the Caribbean.

Scuba Voyages (☎ 800-544-7631; www.scubavoyages.com) These trips go to Bonaire, Dominica, Saba, St Lucia and Tobago.

Don't forget your C-card! If you are a certified diver, you'll be required to show proof before a reputable dive operator will rent you equipment or take you out on a dive. Your PADI, NAUI or other certification card will do the trick.

World Dive Adventures (☎ 800-433-3483; www.worlddive.com) These trips usually include a week's worth of hotels, meals and two dives per day. Destinations include the Bahamas; Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao; St Lucia; Cayman Islands; and Turks and Caicos.

LIVE-ABOARDS

Aggressor (☎ 800-348-2628; www.aggressor.com) With a fleet of live-aboards plying several of the world's waters, Aggressor has a great reputation. The 18-passenger *Cayman Aggressor IV* tours the Caymans and the 20-passenger *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* tours – you guessed it – the Turks and Caicos.

Explorer Ventures (☎ 800-322-3577; www.explorerverventures.com) These live-aboards include the 18-passenger MV *Caribbean Explorer I*, which travels the Bahamas, and the 18-passenger MV *Caribbean Explorer II*, which cruises to Saba, St Kitts and Nevis, Sint Eustatius and St-Martin/Sint Maarten. The 20-passenger MV *Turks & Caicos Explorer II* heads to those islands.

Peter Hughes Diving (☎ 800-932-6237; www.peterhughes.com) This long-respected company has week-long live-aboard tours of Tobago on the 18-passenger *Wind Dancer*.

Internet Resources

Complete Diving Guides (www.caribdiveguide.com) Dive site profiles with excerpts from *The Complete Diving Guide* series.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Click on the Thorn Tree's Diving & Snorkeling forum to chat with other new and experienced divers.

Scuba Diving (www.scubadiving.com) The website of *Scuba Diving* magazine offers articles on all the Caribbean destinations, with links to dive operators. Also has an active forum.

Skin Diver Online (www.skin-diver.com) The website for *Skin Diver* magazine has links to hundreds of articles about diving in each region.

Sport Diver (www.sportdiver.com) *Sport Diver* magazine is the official publication of the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) and this website, a tremendous resource, is the online version.

Marine Conservation Organizations

Around the world, coral reefs and oceans face unprecedented environmental pressures. This is particularly true in the Caribbean, where vast episodes of coral bleaching threaten everything from fishing and culture, to land ecology and tourism. The following groups promote responsible diving practices, publicize environmental marine threats and lobby for better policies:

Caribbean Environment Programme (www.cep.unep.org) A conglomerate of Caribbean legislative bodies working to protect the coastal environment and promote sustainable development.

Coral reefs are an integral part of a marine ecosystem, supporting life up and down the food chain. Like elsewhere in the world, Caribbean reefs are at risk. For details on the threats, see p48.

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Please consider the following tips when diving and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs.

- Never use anchors on the reef and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, touch only exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms.
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control. Divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef can cause major damage.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites.
- Ensure that you take home all your garbage and any litter you find. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish and minimize your disturbance of marine animals.

GOLD-STAR MARINE PARKS

Diving and snorkeling help keep Caribbean tourism thriving, and many islands recognize the need to protect their underwater resources. In recent years several marine parks have been established to reduce human pressure on the reef systems. While some are effective, others fail due to meager resources, poor management or lack of enforcement. Several marine parks get gold stars for their success at preservation, education and continued foresight.

Bonaire Marine Park (www.bmp.org) A Unesco World Heritage site, Bonaire's marine park was established in 1979, making the island one of the early leaders in reef preservation. It continues to be at the forefront of research and education, most of which is funded by a 'nature' fee levied on users (\$25/10 scuba divers/snorkelers).

Saba Marine Park (www.sabapark.org) Established in 1987, the park encircles the entire island and has 36 permanent mooring buoys. Every diver pays a fee of US\$4 that contributes to park maintenance.

Statia Marine Park (www.statiapark.org) Many of Statia's reefs have developed on the remains of an extinct volcano and boast incredible biodiversity. Established in 1996, the park encircles the island and includes two reserves where fishing and anchoring are prohibited. The park's 42 permanent mooring buoys help protect the reefs. Divers pay a \$3 user fee.

CORAL: The Coral Reef Alliance (www.coralreefalliance.org) This global nonprofit organization works with coastal communities on protecting coral through education, ecosystem management and sustainable tourism.

Ocean Futures Society (www.oceanfutures.org) Jean-Michel Cousteau's organization focuses on the connection between human impact and the health of the world's oceans.

Project AWARE Foundation (www.projectaware.org) Has a mandate to conserve underwater environments through education, advocacy and awareness.

Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF; www.reef.org) An organization of scientists, divers and community leaders, dedicated to promoting conservation through research and education.

DIVING

The following dive sites were picked as 'dream dives' for several reasons: they represent the Caribbean's wide diving variety, they are easily accessible with local dive operators, and they all offer fantastic diving *and* snorkeling.

Bloody Bay Wall, Little Cayman

Little Cayman has some of the finest Caribbean wall diving, where sheer cliffs drop so vertically they make you gasp in your regulator. Little Cayman's Bloody Bay Marine Park encompasses some 22 mooring sites spanning both Bloody and Jackson's Bays. The shallow tops of the walls – some just 20ft (6m) below the surface – are nearly as incredible as their depths. The snorkeling here can be fantastic. The drop-offs sink quickly along this stretch of the island's north shore that's more than a mile (1.6km) long. Coral and sponges of all types, colors and sizes cascade downward as you slowly descend along the wall. Most dives here range from 40ft to 100ft (12m to 30m) deep.

- Dive type: wall
- Shore/boat: boat
- More info: www.bloodybaywall.com

Keyhole Pinnacles, St Lucia

You wonder sometimes if Picasso came along with his paintbrush to coat St Lucia's corals with splashes of vibrant color. One of the best sites to see this display is the Keyhole Pinnacles, four underwater sea mountains that mimic the drama of St Lucia's famed Pitons. Rising up from 1000ft (305m) below sea level to just below the surface, the pinnacles are

While it's safe to dive soon *after* flying, your last dive should be completed at least 12 hours (some experts say 24 hours) *before* a flight to minimize the risk of decompression sickness caused by residual nitrogen in the blood.

coated in colorful hard and soft corals, sea sponges and delightful fans. Underwater photographers flock here to snap brilliantly vivid shots.

- Dive type: pinnacle
- Shore/boat: boat

Klein Bonaire

Since 1979, Bonaire's entire perimeter has been a protected marine park and its excellent administration has paid off. Dive boats are required to use permanent moorings and popular dive sites are periodically closed to let the reefs recover. One of Bonaire's best dive areas is off relatively uninhabited Klein Bonaire, where the gently sloping reef is positively festooned with hard and soft corals, sponges, gorgonians and a dizzying array of tropical fish. Look for unusual marine life like a brown long-snout sea-horse or a yellow frogfish. Popular sites include Carl's Hill Annex, which, like most of the sites, is perfect for divers of all levels.

- Dive type: reef
- Shore/boat: boat

Little Tobago

Situated on the South American Continental Shelf between the Caribbean and Atlantic, Tobago gets massaged by the Guyana and the North Equatorial currents. Also injected with periodic pulses of nutrient-rich water from the Orinoco River, Tobago's waters teem with marine life. The variety of corals, sponges and ancient sea fans make Tobago a top destination. Heart-pulsing drift dives swish you past large pelagic fish. Some of the world's largest brain corals grow around Little Tobago island, where manta rays swoop by for regular visits.

- Dive type: drift
- Shore/boat: boat
- More info: www.tobagodiveexperience.com

RMS *Rhone*, British Virgin Islands

On a sun-washed October morning in 1867 the captain of the RMS *Rhone* thought the hurricane season was over. Built just two years earlier, the *Rhone* was one of a new class of British steamships, 310ft (94m) long and 40ft (12m) abeam.

Around 11am, the sky grew leaden, and hurricane-force winds began to blow. The *Rhone* struggled to pass Salt Island, but the waves and wind drove her ashore. The ship's boiler exploded, and only 23 of the 147 passengers survived.

The stern with its propeller now lies in 20ft to 40ft (6m to 12m) of water. The forward half lies nearby and intact about 80ft (24m) under. Divers salvaged copper, cotton, liquor and US\$20,000 worth of money and gold. The BVI National Parks Trust moved in to preserve the wreck in the 1970s, long after divers had picked it clean. Today, it is one of the Caribbean's best wreck dives, for snorkelers, and novice and experienced divers.

- Dive type: wreck
- Shore/boat: boat
- More info: www.scubabvi.com

Saba Marine Park

The world's only self-supporting marine park offers a little something for everyone. Well out of the paths of storm or anchor damage, a collection

'the gently sloping reef is positively festooned with corals, sponges and a dizzying array of fish'

of pinnacles – including Third Encounter, Twilight Zone, Outer Limits and Shark Shoals – peak at about 80ft (24m) below, offering a deep but spectacular dive. Snorkelers can explore a variety of structures at Well's Bay and Torrens Point, where large boulders and swim-throughs sit just beneath the surface.

- Dive type: pinnacles and reef
- Shore/boat: boat
- More info: www.sabapark.org

Salt Cay, Turks & Caicos

Expect spectacular diving throughout the Turks and Caicos, where excellent visibility, unspoiled reefs, abundant marine life and vertical walls conspire to transport divers to an underwater utopia. Mostly uninhabited, Salt Cay is just south of Grand Turk and its north-shore wall is pocked with crevasses and grooves, overhangs and swim-throughs. The fish-watching is excellent and you'll often see spotted eagle rays, giant tiger grouper, and triggerfish. In the winter you have a good chance of spotting migrating humpback whales traversing the Turks Island Passage, the waterway separating the Turks from the Caicos Islands. Whales start to appear in late December and stick around through March. Just 16 miles (26km) south of Salt Cay is the wreck of the HMS *Endymion*, an 18th-century British warship. Nine ship anchors lie exposed in shallow water, making it a good wreck for snorkelers to explore too.

- Dive type: wall
- Shore/boat: shore and boat

Scotts Head, Soufriere Bay Marine Reserve, Dominica

The highlight of Dominica diving is undoubtedly Soufriere Bay on the southwestern tip of the island. Formed and defined by the submerged crater of an underwater volcano, the dive sites reflect the volcanic action that created them – deep walls, pinnacles, massive boulders, chasms and gullies offer some of the Caribbean's most dramatic diving. The east edge of the crater is the shoreline, making for accessible shore dives and snorkeling, and the south edge is around Scotts Head, where you'll find a sheer drop-off whose many overhangs shelter healthy schools of fish, like barracuda and Bermuda chub. Soufriere Pinnacles is another popular spot, where three separate pinnacles reach up to almost break the surface. The swim out to the site passes over submerged hot springs and gas vents where tiny fish play in the bubbles.

- Dive type: wall and pinnacle
- Shore/boat: shore and boat
- More info: www.natureislanddive.com

Sint Eustatius

Hard-core divers will appreciate Sint Eustatius' focus on its underwater bounty, along with the sheer variety of its dive sites. The island's last volcanic eruption was 1600 years ago, but you can still see evidence of the hardened lava-flow on the seabed, providing deep trenches and fissures. Vestiges of 18th-century colonial Sint Eustatius are found beneath the surface, such as portions of quay wall that slipped into the sea, and old ballast stones, anchors, canons and ship remains have become vibrant coral reefs. A series of newly sunk wrecks add diving variety. The island's waters are protected by the Statia Marine Park.

- Dive type: reef and wreck
- Shore/boat: boat

Of the world's 375 species of shark, only 30 have ever attacked humans. Since 1580, only 18 shark attacks have been reported in the Caribbean Islands.

St Vincent & the Grenadines

The 32 cays and islands that compose the Grenadines stretch out in a bracelet of tropical jewels between St Vincent and Grenada. Long known as a yachters' haven, the sparsely inhabited islands and pristine bays shelter thriving offshore reefs. You'll find steep walls decorated with black coral around St Vincent, giant schools of fish around Bequia, a coral wonderland around Canouan and pure bliss in the Tobago Cays. The five cays are palm-studded deserted islands surrounded by shallow reefs that are part of a protected marine sanctuary, and offer some of the most pristine reef diving in the Caribbean.

- Dive type: wall and reef
- Shore/boat: boat

SNORKELING

Donning a mask and snorkel allows you to turn the beach into an underwater aquarium. There are numerous sites throughout the Caribbean that offer splendid coral gardens, often teeming with colorful tropical fish including many varieties of wrasse, damselfish, sergeant majors, rainbow-colored parrotfish, angelfish, ballooning puffer fish and octopus. The best snorkeling is usually along rocky outcrops or on shallow reefs.

Some travelers bring along their own mask, snorkel and fins, but if you prefer to travel light you can usually rent equipment (about US\$10 per day) at dive shops or beachside water-sports shacks. Having your own equipment can be enormously liberating, letting you jump in the water wherever you want.

The following is a list of some of the region's top snorkeling sites. Some are popular; others are off the beaten track. All of the dives listed in this chapter are great snorkeling sites too.

- Anse Chastanet, St Lucia (p640)
- The Baths, Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands (p405)
- Buccoo Reef, Tobago (p761)
- Buck Island, St Croix, US Virgin Islands (p381)
- De Palm Island, Aruba (p785)
- Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, Bahamas (p98)
- Shoal Bay West, Anguilla (p427)
- Stingray City, Grand Cayman (p199)
- Wreck of the *Jettias*, Antigua (p535)

'the islands that compose the Grenadines stretch out in a bracelet of tropical jewels'

On the Road



RYAN VER BERKMOES Coordinating Author

It was late afternoon at the delightfully shabby and unvisited Fort James (p525) on Antigua. I had the place almost to myself: it was me, a dude singing to himself and a chicken. I looked out to sea then scanned my notes, trying to figure out if this gun had actually been used to shoot pirates. Verdict: maybe.



AMY C BALFOUR I'm bursting with latitudinal pride after finding the Tropic of Cancer Beach (p97). It's not well-marked, but the view is one-of-a-kind gorgeous. There's also a worn blue line on the ground signifying the Tropic of Cancer. The *Pirates of the Caribbean II* and III crew would load up here before boating south.



PAUL CLAMMER I'm near the end of my trip, in the clean air above Port-au-Prince (p266), wondering how that little notebook is going to be transformed into a guide, and trying to calculate how many more rum punches I can fit in before I head to the airport...



MICHAEL GROSBERG My girlfriend and I had just walked from Playa Bonita (p310) to Playa Coson and back; both are outside Las Terrenas on the Península de Samaná. We were both hungry because the fish shack we were counting on for lunch wasn't open, so I volunteered to get her a coconut. I failed.



RICHARD KOSS My tour guide at Bob Marley's birthplace in Nine Mile (p238) was an intense Rasta whose solemnity about Bob's life was periodically broken by campy outbursts of song. Taking my photo in Marley's childhood home, he sang 'Is This Love,' pointing energetically at the single bed it mentions. I had a hard time maintaining a straight face.

SCOTT KENNEDY Cruising through St Vincent and the Grenadines (p650), it's hard *not* to feel a little like a pirate. Jumping on rickety old boats, floating from island to island, sailing from one adventure to the next, dolphins surfing the bow wave, Tobago Cays on the horizon – just another day on the road.



TOM MASTERS I saw a 3m-long manatee swim by me shortly after this shot was taken. I'm cruising through the lagoon on my way to dive off the Isla de la Juventud (p160), where Cuba's very best (and most difficult to access!) diving is on offer.



JOSH KRIST Banging out a Rolling Stones tune in the music room at Cocoa Cottages (p594), near Trafalgar Falls. My guitar is what I missed most from home. You'll notice my notes on a pillow next to me – I was testing the guitar for research, I swear.



BRENDAN SAINSBURY Cycling on the tropical island of Vieques (p343) can be hot work – especially when you’ve got human cargo fast asleep in the back seat. I’m drinking freshly squeezed lemonade just outside the gate to the now defunct US Navy military zone, a few miles north of the town of Esperanza.



BRANDON PRESSER I didn’t think it was possible for anything to be more beautiful than Saba’s (p469) striking rugged peak, but lo and behold, the island’s offshore reef system, 100ft underwater, is a magnificent kingdom of colorful coral patrolled by scores of slippery sharks.



ELLE THALHEIMER Pure elation is what I feel when I discover a cycling jewel such as the out-and-back from Toco to Matelot (p749), a coastal ride that follows a hilly, remote road skirting a wild coastline that will drop your jaw.



KARLA ZIMMERMAN I was amazed by the Lind Point Trail (p372), which departs from Cruz Bay, St John. It left civilization fast in its wake, replacing it with yellow-bellied banana quits, wild donkeys nibbling shrubs, and beaches that were deserted except for the sea-grape trees (and this sign).

For full author biographies see p855.

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