

Venture beyond the beaches to explore volcanoes, swim with whale sharks, dance at a 400-year-old festival, and taste your way around the islands.

CARIBBEAN

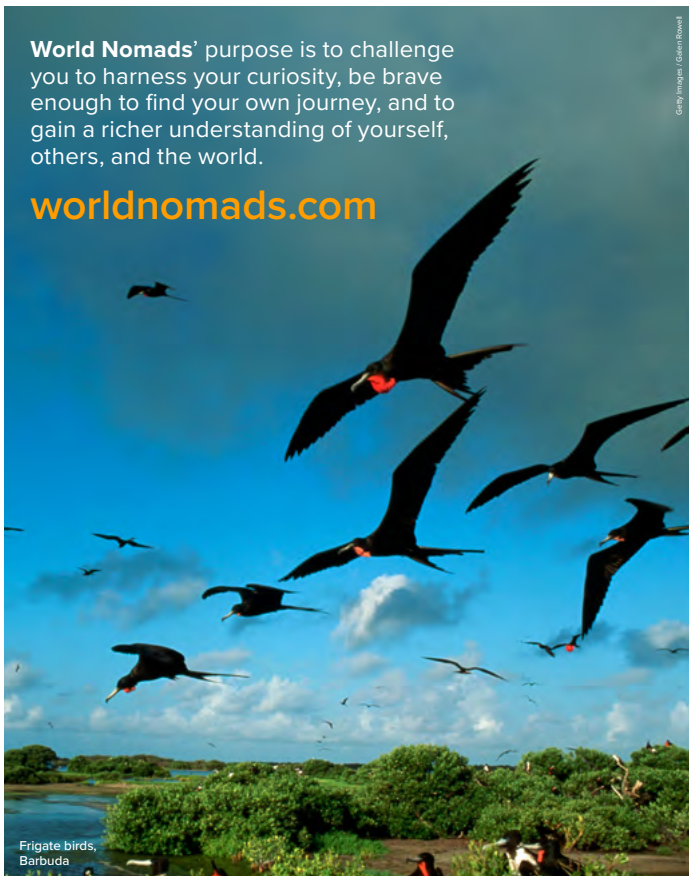
Where Nomads Go

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WELCOME

Putting together this guide starts with defining exactly what the Caribbean is. Some would classify it as the islands and nations surrounded by or bordering the Caribbean Sea. We chose a broader definition, including places such as The Bahamas, that aren't technically in the Caribbean, but share its culture and character.

However you demarcate it, the Caribbean can't be easily summed up. With influences from around the world and topography that ranges from frosty mountain peaks to dense rainforest, it's much more multifaceted than its picture-postcard reputation might suggest. We can't possibly cover it all in a handful of pages, and we aren't going to try.

Think of this guide as a series of windows into a Caribbean you never knew existed – from Curaçao's contemporary art scene, to an effervescent coral reef in Dominica, to a Hindu festival of lights in Trinidad and Tobago.

We've also included a useful Travel Safety Guide to help you navigate the region safely and bravely. So, discover the Caribbean, World Nomads style!



ESSENTIAL CARIBBEAN

Don't miss out on these one-of-a-kind destinations, experiences, and adventures.



Race America's Cup yachts in St. Maarten

Getty Images / Thomson Reuters



Plant coral in Bonaire

Boat Renewal Foundation/Bowen / RBRE



Climb an active volcano on St. Vincent

America's Cup / Photo Courtesy: Commodore



Sample local specialties everywhere

Getty Images / Photo Courtesy: Commodore



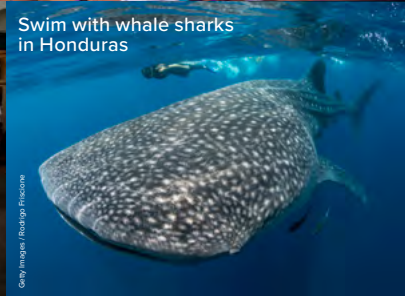
Rappel down a waterfall in Dominica

Getty Images / Michael Wolford



Learn to bomba dance in Puerto Rico

Robert Harding / Sylvia Granddam



Swim with whale sharks in Honduras

Getty Images / Rodrigo Fonseca



Explore a modern-day Pompeii in Montserrat

Veronica Williams / Photo Courtesy: Commodore



Watch a regatta of hand-built boats in The Bahamas

Veronica Williams / Photo Courtesy: Commodore



Join revelers at Trinidad's exuberant Holi festival

Getty Images / Adam Pignone



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FOOD, MUSIC & CULTURE

Bomba and drums

Undisturbed by outsiders until the 15th century, the Caribbean has been indelibly marked by European colonists, the African slave trade, and the importation of migrant workers from Asia and Indonesia. There's no denying the darkness of some parts of its history, but what's emerged is a crossroads of cultures as rich, diverse, and vibrant as anywhere on earth.

Tasting My Way Around the Caribbean

Food here is as varied as the region itself, combining local produce, spices, and seafood with influences from around the world. **Audrey Gillan** visits three islands, discovering three very different food cultures.

Barbados

Through a window hatch at the front of a brightly painted wooden shack, Cuz hands me a fish cutter, his face breaking into a giant smile. I've been waiting here, near Pebbles Beach in Barbados, the easternmost island of the Lesser Antilles, for one of its most famous sandwiches – cutters – a salt-bread roll filled with fried fish seasoned with Bajan spices. These are typically allspice, onion powder, chillies, thyme, parsley, nutmeg, clove, and black pepper.

Cuz's father, Cuz senior, began the business almost seven decades ago, and the family still sells around 500 cutters a day. Pointing to a stack of rolls, Cuz says, "When they're done, I'm done; I pack up and go." Inside, a radio blares and two large pans keep the oil sizzling as Cuz

deftly fries fish and fires them onto buns, topping each with salad. The fish is soft, sweet, and so moreish I get back in line for seconds.

Eating out in Barbados can be expensive – the west coast of the island is dotted with wallet-busting fine-dining restaurants – but when you seek out the local fare, you'll find gems like Cuz's. Food stalls and vans serving hot lunches out of their back doors cluster in beach car parks and "pon de roadside": fried chicken or baked fish, accompanied by macaroni pie – known as just "pie"; it's made with long tubes of macaroni, mixed with cheese, evaporated milk, Bajan spices, and hot sauce, all of it baked until crisp. These are cooked daily in homes across the island, loaded into silver chafing dishes, and driven out to meet demand.

Stop by the wet markets in Bridgetown, Oistins, or Speightstown to see the abundant varieties of fish caught not far from shore: marlin, mahi mahi, and the ubiquitous flying fish, which shimmer when they swim in shoals and break the surface of the water. Upstairs at bustling Cheapside vegetable market you'll discover tiny, hole-in-the-wall food stalls that fry doughy fish cakes made from salt fish, flour, herbs, and spices.

On a Friday night, head to Oistin's Friday Night Fish Fry for seafood, rum, beer, dominoes, and dancing. There's always



Castries Market, St. Lucia

The stallholder is trying to tempt the big, white, Welsh Rastafarian cook: "Look at these dasheen, Ras, beautiful dasheen".

a long queue at Uncle George Fish Net Grill, where the eponymous Uncle George, tongs in one hand, spatula in the other, flips tuna, swordfish, lobster, shrimp, and "dolphin" (mahi mahi).

Or take your own, self-guided local food tour by hopping on one of the souped-up vans (ZR buses) that pump out reggae music and beep their horns at potential passengers on the sidewalk. Costing \$1 US a ride, they're an ideal way to skip from rum shop to rum shop, sipping rum punch while you try Barbados' national dish: flying fish and *cou cou* (cornmeal and okra).

In Barbados, "having a lime" is to party and have a good time, and zipping around on "reggae buses" is just that.

St. Lucia

There's nutmeg and cinnamon, soursop, sugar apples, limes, plantains – even cow's milk in recycled glass bottles, all piled on top of wooden stalls. It's a Saturday morning at Castries Market in St. Lucia, about 110mi (180km) northwest of Barbados, and chef Craig Jones – a big, white, Welsh Rastafarian – and I are picking our way around large, muddy puddles amidst a cacophony of cries and Creole sales pitches.

I point quizzically to a large root vegetable, but before Jones can answer, the stallholder is trying to tempt him: "Look at these dasheen, Ras, beautiful dasheen". I am still puzzled, so Jones – who has been →

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Mangoes at Castries Market



cooking on St. Lucia for two decades now – explains, “Dasheen is like a dry potato, and it becomes sticky when you cook it.” All around us is the sweet smell of mangoes, laid in vast piles, all different shapes, sizes, and hues. “There are 30 to 40 different varieties of mangoes,” Jones tells me. “There’s mango Austin, which is great, but mango Julie is the sweetest and has the best texture and taste.”

But the most prolific fruit in St. Lucia is the banana. Like almost everything grown on this island – it’s a similar story across almost all of the Caribbean – it was imported during colonialist slave-owning times, replacing sugar cane as the cash crop. It features in the confusingly named national dish, green fig and saltfish: green fig is really just green banana. Full of iron, it’s boiled to make it more digestible and served with saltfish (salted white fish, often cod).

It’s at roadside pitstop Red Truck that I find true St. Lucian cooking: stewed pork cooked in its own juices (no water), cloves, onion, chives, and seasonal peppers. There’s black pudding and a deep-flavored

I take a big gulp – realizing too late it’s more firewater than cocktail: it leaves me choking and laughing

cow heel soup, thick in texture from split peas and okra – loved across the island, it often has dasheen or green fig added in.

The cooks offer me a rum punch to wash down my meal. I take a big gulp – realizing too late it’s more firewater than cocktail; it leaves me choking and laughing. My St. Lucian friend Ulrich Augustin snorts: “It is more of a sipping drink.”

Nevis

Sunshine is holding two spiny lobsters in both hands and asking if I’d like one – of course I would. Freshly caught in the waters just off Nevis, a small island near the northern end of the Lesser Antilles, the lobster is grilled and served with butter and hot sauce. I must have it with his famous Killer Bee, says Sunshine (real name Llewellyn Caines: “My grandmother called me Sunshine from the day I was born, because I smiled and didn’t stop”). It’s a rum-based, spicy cocktail with some kicks so secret he’d have to “kill me” if he told me what they were. He boasts, “It’s so good, people come over from St. Kitts just to drink it.”

On the tables at Sunshine’s restaurant on Pinney’s Beach are bottles of Nevis Hot Pepper Sauce. I discover they’re made by Llewellyn Clarke, an English chef who returned to his family’s Nevis roots to cook in a hotel, and set up a sideline making what I believe to be one of the finest hot sauces in the Caribbean.

In his kitchen in Rawlins Village, known as the island’s breadbasket because of its abundance of fruit and fresh produce, the smell of sweet but punchy Scotch bonnet chilis fills the air as he boils the fiery red peppers down with vinegar, salt, sugar, thyme and garlic. “My bottles are filled with love and sunshine. I don’t do the final bottling until I think the sauce has matured enough – I am always tasting it, it is just like making wine. There’s a point in your memory where you know what something should taste like,” he explains.

The national dish of Nevis is fried fish and johnny cakes, originally derived from the word “journey,” possibly because the balls of slightly sweet, crisp-fried dough are easily portable. Often, johnny cakes will be served at breakfast with stewed saltfish, tomatoes, lettuce, and hard-boiled eggs. Also beloved is goat water – more like a cross between a soup and a stew – with hints of clove, black pepper, thyme, and Scotch bonnet in the sauce, cooked low and slow until the goat is meltingly soft. After only a few mouthfuls, I need a bottle of Carib beer, because goat water, like so many things in Nevis, has a bit of a kick.



UNFORGETTABLE

Connecting Through Craft Beer

Before visiting in 2019, I hadn’t visited Puerto Rico (PR) in 14 years, before the term “craft beer” entered the lexicon of anyone outside the savviest of mainland American connoisseurs. True, I’d snuck the occasional sip of Cuba Libre during my family’s annual vacations, taken to nurture friendships forged in 1950, when my Caucasian grandparents began bringing their children down every year for a winter escape. But in 2005, I had yet to imagine I’d become a professional beer writer, and options for local *cerveza* consisted of little more than mass-produced Medalla.

When a work trip called me to return, I sought out several of PR’s dozen-or-so artisanal breweries, plus bar owners and homebrewers. I learned that independent breweries like Ocean Lab, Pura Vida, FOK, and REBL are blossoming from the beaches to the mountains. In San Juan, publicans are pouring them all.

The geographic penetration surprised me. But true shock came from witnessing the prevalence of craft brewers I’ve devoted my career to writing about.

One afternoon, stopping for lunch in what used to be barely passable jungle, I literally gasped when I spotted a coffee shop covered in decorative signs for breweries like Bell’s, Cigar City, and North Coast. Two decades ago, I doubt this area had running water. Now it has American craft beer.

And at La Taberna Boricua in San Juan, a keg poured Founders Canadian Breakfast Stout, a Michigan beer so rare I’ve never seen it on draught. Words evaded me when the bartender poured me an entire pint.

I’ve carried a lot of guilt about neglecting my life-long Puerto Rican friends, especially after Hurricane Maria. But with this new community joining my present with my past, I feel my sentimental homeland has embraced me anew. *Tara Nurin*

Ocean Lab Craft Beer

BEYOND REGGAE:

THE CARIBBEAN'S NEW GROOVES

The region may be famous for calypso and reggae, but the music scene doesn't stop there. **Talia Woolldridge** shares how the islands have put their own spin on jazz, electronic music, and dancehall beats.

The islands of the Caribbean have proudly claimed ownership of their native styles of music, flavored with North American and European influences. Jamaican ska, reggae and dancehall, Trinidadian calypso and soca, as well as French-Caribbean's cadence and zouk, have all been major exports and festival

draws since their inception. But starting in the 1980s, jazz, electronic music, and Jamaican gospel dancehall have also entered into the Caribbean music circuit.

Caribbean jazz

In 2006, I was working at my aunt's restaurant in Nevis. I had just graduated from music school, and was keen to utilize my new skills and contacts. While getting to know the local bar and restaurant owners, it struck me that the island was ripe for a blues and jazz festival, as it attracted a traveler demographic I felt would enjoy world-renowned artists in a tropical setting. Many scoffed at my youthful idea, reminding me that St. Lucia already had a world-renowned jazz festival, but some encouraged me to pursue it.

Sadly, Nevis was hit by a hurricane in 2008, knocking out the Four Seasons, one of the main hotels on the small island and a major draw for tourist dollars. I shelved my idea and pursued work in North America.

As early as the 1980s, jazz music started to gain popularity throughout the Caribbean



Jazz pianist Monty Alexander at the 2014 Saint Lucia Jazz & Arts Festival



Trumpet player, Havana

But I must have been onto something. Less than a decade later, the Nevis Blues Festival debuted in April 2015 and lasted two years, until another hurricane hit in 2018. Now, blues and jazz performances are scattered throughout the island at various resorts and hotels.

But as early as the 1980s, jazz music started to gain popularity throughout the Caribbean. The softening of intra-Caribbean musical barriers allowed an influx of musical styles to infiltrate the region through global radio stations, visitors, and youth who attended college abroad and brought new styles of music back home. Such is the case with Arturo Tappin, a Barbadian saxophonist first

attended jazz music when his son attended university in North America. Apparently Tappin's Barbadian manager, Scofield Pilgrim, then introduced many Trinidadians to jazz when he lived in Port of Spain, Trinidad. And in turn, Trinidadian Gene Lawrence later became chairman of St. Lucia's jazz society.

In 1986, Aruba's Jazz and Latin Music Festival debuted, running until 2001. It was the Caribbean's inaugural jazz festival. St. Lucia's Jazz Festival followed in 1992. Paxton Baker, a young American who would go on to become a philanthropist, organized and booked award-winning international talent for both festivals, as well as Trinidad's Pan Jazz Festival,

→



celebrating the rising popularity of this Caribbean music genre, which features jazzy arrangements of popular tunes on the steelpan.

The success of these early jazz festivals inspired 30 more annual festivals throughout the Caribbean by the mid-90s, along with an influx of jazz clubs scattered throughout the islands. Many festivals eventually merged to soul, pop, R&B, and reggae headliners, including the late Amy Winehouse. But strictly jazz-programmed festivals are still running in Haiti, Barbados, Havana (Cuba), and Bermuda; the latter two run every two years. Year-round, Havana hosts amazing jazz at various hotspots around the city, including Jazz Club, La Zorra y el Cuervo, and Miramar Jazz.

Gospel dancehall

When I visited Kingston in 2010, the Jamaica Family Festival was on. It was a

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beautiful outdoor concert with delicious jerk food, smiling kids, and live music. When local singer Kevin Smith took the mic and began to sing the gospel over dancehall riddims, I did a triple-take; I had never heard dancehall praise God before!

Gospel dancehall emerged in the early 1990s, around the time the original down an' dutty dancehall was making a global impact in music. With a similar reaction to the "rude boys" of early reggae music, many church-going Jamaicans could not embrace dancehall's explicit lyrics and raunchy dance moves.

Given the popularity of gospel pop music in Jamaica since the 1980s, gospel dancehall was a natural evolution as a cleaner, family-friendly (and Christian) spin on an otherwise popular dance genre. Gospel reggae would quickly become interchangeable with the genre. Lady Saw, Papa San, Goddy Goddy, DJ Nicholas (who converted to singing the gospel after

a dream), Prodigal Son, Lt. Stiche, and Kevin Smith are a few of the artists to emerge.

Electronic music in the Caribbean

Given the French and Dutch Caribbean ties to the European club scene, and Rihanna hailing from Barbados, it was only a matter of time before the Caribbean became the new host for various underground electronic dance music (EDM) festivals, featuring DJs performing long before the genre caught hold.

EDM festivals in the Caribbean started with Aruba's long-running Love Festival. Its demise in 2014 paved the way for SXM Festival, a boutique music festival featuring international DJs such as Dubfire and Nina Kravitz that debuted in 2016 across the Dutch-French island of St. Martin-Sint Maarten. Given the Dutch ties to club culture, Sint Maarten already had a thriving techno scene and nightlife. The festival brought new, international DJs to these clubs.

I was fortunate enough to attend the festival during its first two years. Dreamy music by DJs Behrouz, Chaim, and The Doctors flowed all afternoon from a treetop booth, overlooking infinity pools hugged by the thumping dance floor. Festival goers splashed about in sunglasses and on unicorn floaties. The intimate setting was pure bliss, refreshingly free of bros, muscle t-shirts, and obnoxious attitudes.

In April 2018, Vujaday Festival arrived in Barbados with a sunrise party, featuring headliner Moses, over the breathtaking cliff of Bathsbeba Beach, and YookO's album release aboard the pirate ship, *The Jolly Roger*, where partiers swung out on a rope into the Caribbean waters over lush electronic music beats. When the festival isn't running, electronic music fans flock to the sultry Nikki Beach bar, with its signature orange lounges and splash pool.

Jamaica also started the small but



Lady Saw, Reggae Sumfest, Montego Bay, Jamaica

growing Tmrw.Tday Festival, featuring a blend of electronic music and a Saturday night reggae showcase that brings out many locals. Traditionally, electronic music in Jamaica has been heard in its native genres: dancehall and dub music. Lee "Scratch" Perry was an innovator and pioneer in dub music due to his remixing, studio techniques, and production style. Dub, in turn, inspired electronic music genre dubstep.

To some purists, Jamaica rivals Germany for creating new synthesized genres. In any case, the Caribbean influence on these music styles can't be denied – and the music world is much richer as a result.

Given the popularity of gospel pop music in Jamaica since the 1980s, gospel dancehall was a natural evolution

INDO-CARIBBEAN CULTURE:

TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

Migrants from India are a major portion of T&T's population – and a huge and colorful influence on its food, festivals, and daily life. Trinidad native **Vernon Ramesar** shares his experiences.

When I travel and tell people I'm from Trinidad and Tobago, it often results in blank stares. Sometimes people are genuinely unaware the island nation exists. Another reason, though rarely voiced, is probably because I'm obviously of South Asian rather than African descent.

My Indo-Caribbean background isn't at all unusual. About 40% of the population of Trinidad and Tobago is of Indian descent, which may come as a surprise to those unfamiliar with the country's British colonial past.

Historical legacy

When slavery here ended in the early 19th century, the British turned to India as a ready-made source of cheap labor for the sugar and cocoa plantations. About 150,000 indentured laborers arrived in Trinidad from India between 1845 and 1917. Most chose to stay on after their indentureship period was over, and that decision has shaped Trinidad ever since.

Trinidad and Tobago is a two-island state just 7mi (11km) off the coast of Venezuela, at the southernmost tip of the Caribbean archipelago. Locals usually refer to it as "T&T", and to themselves as "Trinis".

Though the two islands are definitely one country, they couldn't be more different.

Trinidad is the larger of the two islands and home to more than 90% of the country's population. It's where almost all of the Indian migrants, including my great-great-grandfather, settled.

The historical legacy of Indo-Trinidadians can be seen in place names such as Barrackpore, Fyzabad, Patna Village, and Calcutta Settlement. It's in the faces that you see on the street and the names you



Phagwa celebrations, Tunapuna, Trinidad

While politics can sometimes divide Trinidadians, food always unites them. There's a Trinidad expression "better belly buss than good food waste"

hear on the evening television news. A glance at the news will also show that T&T still votes mainly along racial lines, with one party drawing its main support from Indo-Trinidadians and the other from Afro-Trinidadians.

Food

While politics can sometimes divide Trinidadians, food always unites them. There's a Trinidad expression "better belly buss than good food waste", meaning it's better to eat till your stomach explodes than leave delicious food behind. Though I have no evidence of ruptured stomachs as a result of this advice, I can attest to the Trinidadian love of food. We sing songs about it, post memes about it, and most of all we eat it... lots of it.

Trinis enjoy an astonishing choice of foods – often on the same plate – and Indian food plays a prominent role. "Doubles" is something of a national obsession; a street food that can be either a quick snack or a hearty breakfast depending on how many you consume. Curried chickpeas are sandwiched between two flat pieces of fried dough called *baras* (thus the name "doubles") and served on a piece of paper with whatever savory sauces are on offer. Popular doubles vendors have a throng of customers standing around their cart.

As with most things, there are always attempts to improve on perfection. In recent years, some restaurants have dreamt up "chicken doubles" and "shrimp doubles". Like most locals, I view such →





Divali festival

abominations with scorn. Real doubles are always vegetarian and never fancy.

Curry is another Indo-Trinidadian staple that has become part of the mainstream. Trinidad curries have a simpler flavor profile than their Indian cousins but are no less tasty. Curried meat dishes are available throughout the country, often accompanied by a wide selection of vegetarian sides and usually served with roti (a soft flatbread). When they're on the go, many locals opt for a "wrap roti": roti, curry, and vegetables folded into the perfect handheld meal.

Like many Indian families, mine converted to Christianity more than 100 years ago, but that doesn't stop me from accepting invitations to *pujas* (Hindu prayers). When it comes to food, all religious lines in Trinidad are permanently blurred. Hospitality is an integral part of every *puja*, and the food provided after the ritual is some of the best home cooking available on the island.

Thousands of twinkling *deyas*, like fields of fallen stars, punctuate the route and create a special sort of magic

Guests sit at communal tables with a large leaf as a plate, and are served a delicious variety of vegetarian dishes. You eat with your hands, and seconds are actively encouraged.

Festivals

The Trinidadian love of food is almost matched by our love of a celebration. Though Carnival is the preeminent festival, Indian celebrations are also an important part of the national calendar. Divali, the Hindu festival of lights dedicated to the goddess Lakshmi, is by far the most prominent. Hindus beautify their homes and offer *pujas* in preparation for the night of Divali. Starting on Divali evening, small clay lamps called *deyas*, filled with coconut oil, are lit and placed in and around Hindu homes throughout the country.

On Divali night, I usually drive through the villages of Central Trinidad towards the coastal village of Felicity, which is famous for its ostentatious Divali lighting displays. The air everywhere along the route is filled with the sounds of *bhajans* (hymns). Thousands of twinkling *deyas*, like fields of fallen stars, punctuate the route and create a special sort of magic. It's deeply moving, and a beautiful expression of a faith passed down unchanged through the generations.

While Divali is a festival of quiet reflection, Phagwa (also called Holi) is a raucous and fun affair. It's the Hindu spring celebration, held at recreation grounds throughout the country. Participants throw colored dye (*abir* or *abeer*) in both powdered and liquid form at each other, accompanied by traditional chowtal music and much laughter. I've learned not to try to dodge the dye, as it's futile, and getting messy is the whole point.

In 1994, Indian Arrival Day was made a public holiday in Trinidad and Tobago, to commemorate the arrival of the first Indian immigrants in 1845. But in many ways, every day in Trinidad is testament to their lasting legacy.



UNFORGETTABLE

Maypole Festival

Every May in Bluefields, a small town on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, the streets explode into a month-long celebration that traces its lineage back 400 years – not to Spain, but to Great Britain.

British pirates first touched these shores in the 17th century, where they met the indigenous Miskitos. Over the years, former African slaves, European settlers, and Caribbean immigrants formed Nicaragua's English-speaking Creole people. One of them was my great-grandmother.

On my first night in Bluefields, my cousins took me to a neighborhood block party. There was a greasy-pole climb, an ultra-local beauty pageant, and a dance competition around the Maypole, a tree hung with streamers and real fruit.

The Maypole dance was an ancient fertility rite in England, but the people of Bluefields have made it all their own. The dizzying rhythms are unmistakably African, and it's sung in English, Miskito, and Spanish. To dance Maypole, you have to surrender and let your hips bounce of their own volition.

By day, each neighborhood *comparsa*, or troupe, dances in a town-wide parade to live drummers. On the final night, we gathered for the "tulululu", wiggling our way in pairs down a tunnel of joined hands.

But my unforgettable Maypole moment was at a small party thrown by a family friend. Her granddaughters, four and six, took the floor. Effortlessly, they shook their hips to the Maypole rhythm – a good sign that this very old festival will have a very long life. *Lauren Schenckman*

The Maypole Festival is held throughout May.

Native Boat Regattas in The Bahamas

There's no better way to experience the unique culture of The Bahamas than at its annual regatta, where the Out Islanders display their seafaring skills in locally made boats. Jack Reec takes us aboard.

In The Bahamas, the sea surrounds and nurtures each gem-like island. There are times when it tests a person's mettle, tries their soul, and tempers both to produce a hardy breed of sailors who take pride in their power to live in harmony with the powers of the wind and waves. They are the Out Islanders. Here, seamanship is the measure of a person. They set out to sea in locally built boats of horseflesh (a strong local wood ideal for inner boat timbers), and heart pine. The tradition was born soon after The Bahamas were settled.

History of the regatta

The boatbuilding traditions here are strong. Each island community takes pride in its own unique craft. They range from Bimini "bonefishers" to Abaco dinghies to single-masted sloops and twin-masted schooners. There are few plans for these vessels – the construction and hull forms are passed down through many generations. In the early days the boats shared much with the boat-building traditions of West Africa.



Sloops at the starting line

Each island community takes pride in its own unique craft. They range from Bimini "bonefishers" to Abaco dinghies to single-masted sloops and twin-masted schooners

There are many characters among the boatmen, notably Mark Knowles on Long Island. Mark is the man to beat on the one day above all others that is paramount in the demonstration of prowess under sail – Race Day. They say he builds the fastest sloops in The Bahamas.

I witnessed my first Race Day many years ago off Mangrove Cay, Andros Island. I loved sailing, but I was more fascinated by an undercurrent that ran through the regatta. It was rumored that the islander's knowledge of the winds and waters came to them from an ancient and magical connection upwelling from their African roots. They called it Scratch. Elsewhere in the Caribbean it is called Obeah or Santeria, and its roots are in Nigeria's Voodoo traditions.

Before the regatta, I gently raised the topic with the regulars at McPhee's Diner. Contestants gathered in this ramshackle collection of huts to eat, drink, and measure up the competition. I was directed to a man who slept on the settlement beach. He had but one arm and one leg. I found him late in the afternoon under a casuarina tree and we talked well into night over a bottle of Mount Gay rum. From him I learned that there had indeed been some "spell casting" in the weeks prior to the race. I was told exactly which sloop would win by using an offshore wind that would arise exactly at 3pm. The prediction was eerily and absolutely accurate.

The sailors

Race Day is officially known as the National

The annual event began in 1954 with the intention of keeping Bahamian boat building and sailing traditions alive

TRIP NOTES

There's no better way to experience the breathtaking beauty of these semi-tropical waters, no better way of meeting the Bahamian Out Islanders and of getting to know their unique, seafaring culture than the regatta. Many will watch from the shore. Others will arrive early, get to know the regatta officials and the sailors – and perhaps get a spot on one of the fleet of official boats stationed on the start line. This is the best vantage point.

Luckier still will be those cruising the Bahamas in their own boats. Regatta officials often allow the visitor fleet to moor near the start line, in the very midst of the action. This is the single best way to enjoy the regatta. The event is a visual feast, a photographer's dream, and a rare opportunity to experience a centuries-old tradition that is alive and well

GETTING THERE

Nassau, The Bahamas is served by major US airlines feeding into Florida and leaving from two major hubs, Miami and Ft. Lauderdale. Airlines and smaller charter services fly directly into Exuma International Airport from these hubs for approximately US \$600 round trip. Schedules run throughout the week. In addition, ferry services and charter boats travel from Potters Cay in Nassau direct to Exuma, 35mi (56km) south of New Providence. The air-conditioned ferry service costs as little as US \$50. Charter flights cost around US \$200 round trip.

BEING THERE

The 635 Cays of the Exumas offer a wide variety of modern, quality accommodations, at least 20 with excellent reviews. Most are centered around Marsh Harbor.

Family Island Regatta. The annual event began in 1954 with the intention of keeping Bahamian boat building and sailing traditions alive. The event has done its job. Mark Knowles learned boatbuilding from his grandfather and father. He's typical of others who represent generations of local knowledge.

More important still, many younger Bahamians are taking an active interest in the tradition, indicating that the future is pretty well assured.

In August 2019, the impact of Hurricane Dorian on the Abacos, especially Marsh Harbor, where boat building was centered for many years, put the viability of this tradition in question. But the storm has proven to be no match for the ongoing spirit of the regatta.

3 MUSEUMS WORTH A SPECIAL TRIP

From celebrating the richness of Caribbean culture to reckoning with the past, these institutions offer unique takes on the region's complex heritage.

Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue and Jewish Museum, Curaçao

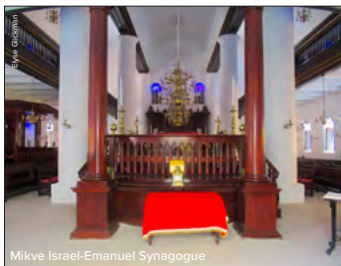
A Dutch territory 40mi (65km) north of Venezuela, Curaçao's appeal to Jewish travelers is that of a fabulous island escape with substance – a rich Jewish history dating to 1651. That history is readily brought to life within Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue, the oldest continuously operating congregation in the Western Hemisphere, and adjoining Curaçao Jewish Museum.

Together, they're the heart and soul of the island's small-but-active Jewish community. The sandy floor and simple-but-elegant baroque interiors serve as constant reminders of how a small group of Sephardic-Portuguese Jewish merchants escaped the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition in the 16th and 17th centuries and contributed to Curaçao's cultural and economic growth.

On my first trip, in 2010, I arrived just in time for Friday night Shabbat services. Afterwards, the rabbi introduced my group to the welcoming, multicultural congregants. He dispelled the popular myth about the temple's sand-covered floor, chuckling at the romantic notion of having sand brought in from the Sinai Desert. Its actual purpose was to muffle footsteps and praying to avoid detection from Spanish invaders or pirates – a legitimate concern when the synagogue was consecrated in 1732.

In 2010, the museum had a modest but nicely arranged assortment of Jewish

A detailed timeline at its entrance puts the island's Jewish history in context with general world history



Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue



© Getty Images/ACTe and G. Arceque

Memorial ACTe Museum

artifacts providing a general overview of Jewish life, traditions, and holidays. Nearly a decade later, it's been extensively refurbished. A detailed timeline at its entrance puts the island's Jewish history in context with general world history, while artifacts from long-established Sephardic and Ashkenazi families humanize the Jewish role in Curaçao society.

On my second visit, in 2019, my close friend Renee said that she felt at home here in a way she hasn't in other Jewish communities. When sharing family names and stories from her Sephardic-Caribbean family tree, the congregants responded in kind with details of their mixed Jewish heritages. Conversations like these, over *challah* and coffee, say as much about Curaçao's collective pride and Jewish culture as the museum does. *Elyse Glickman*

Memorial ACTe Museum, Guadeloupe

Every now and again, you go somewhere that changes you and your world view. The Memorial ACTe museum in Pointe-a-Pitre, Guadeloupe, is such a place. Long after my visit, the memory is as fresh as the day I visited.

It's the largest museum on the planet dedicated to the history of the African slave trade and slavery from the early 17th century to the present. The 77,000ft² (7,154m²) complex, which opened in 2015 on the site of the former Darboussier sugar factory, is an architectural wonder. The black box housing the permanent exhibition is a treasure trove of knowledge. The tiny quartz specks in the black granite honor millions of victims of the slave trade and slavery. →

The black box housing the permanent exhibition is a treasure trove of knowledge

LEARN SOMETHING NEW

The silver latticework symbolizes new, intertwined beginnings.

You could spend days in this museum, which was awarded the 2017 Museum Prize by the Council of Europe for its major contribution to the knowledge of European cultural history. It's part of UNESCO's Slave Route Project, the global initiative to promote the healing and harmony of people through the shared legacy of slavery.

As fascinating as the façade is, the works inside are powerful and soul-stirring. I saw the replica of a slave ship stuffed with hundreds of people side by side. I lifted a chain – once around someone's neck – that was so heavy it pulled my hand downward. It made my heart sink, and brought tears to my eyes. As I walked around the exhibits, reflecting years of oppression, I felt uncomfortable and disturbed. I had never reacted to a museum this way. However, the emotions I felt were cleansing; when truth is acknowledged, there is peace. *Sheryl Nance-Nash*



Clamencia Alexander, Heritage Museum of Carriacou

Heritage Museum of Carriacou, Grenada

The beautiful island of Carriacou, one of seven that makes up the nation of Grenada, takes some effort to get to. But it's worth the 90-minute ferry ride from the capital, St. George's, when you discover gems such as the Heritage Museum of Carriacou.

We stumbled upon this museum one afternoon while poking around in Hillsborough, Carriacou's tiny main town. Located in what we were told is the world's second-oldest cotton gin, it's a cluttered little museum, but amidst the disarray, you can appreciate the colorful music, clothing, and history of the people of Carriacou.

While angling for a closer look at a big drum used in the Maroon Festival, celebrating the island's indigenous culture, I literally stumbled on what, at first, looks like an old log. Some years earlier, a local man found this "log" buried in the sand on Mount Pleasant Beach. As he dug it up,

he realized it was a canoe made from a gum tree from the Orinoco River Basin in Venezuela. The interior had been burned and carved with a stone axe. No one knows who made it or how long it had been buried in the sand.

Upstairs, we found a collection of folk art by Canute Caliste, a self-taught artist whose works are in museums around the world, including the Smithsonian.

Caliste, who died in 2005, was also a master fiddler and boat builder who fathered 22 children. One of those is Clamencia Alexander, who manages the museum. Each month, she showcases a fresh selection of her father's work from her personal collection, which is the world's largest of Caliste's work.

My husband, an art major, loved Caliste's colorful simplicity in capturing the spirit of Carriacou, and we thanked our good fortune to happen upon this charming little museum in this out-of-the-way destination.

Diana Lambdin Meyer

Amidst the disarray, you can appreciate the colorful music, clothing, and history of the people of Carriacou



UNFORGETTABLE

Playing Jouvert at Trinidad Carnival

Burning sunshine, booming soca music, and blinged-out parades may be most people's image of a Caribbean carnival, but for me, it's the untamed intensity of "dirty mas" (masquerade): joining a city full of revelers to dance through moonlit streets under a coating of mud, body paint, oil, and even melted chocolate. This orgy of pure, unadulterated bacchanalia is Jouvert, a loose translation of the French *jour ouvert* (opening of the day), and the official start of the Caribbean's biggest and best Carnival.

This pre-dawn ritual begins with a 2am alarm, hot coffee, the first of many rum shots, and the briefest of outfits, pearly-white and ready for adornment. Outside, the air crackles with misrule as we meet our band and receive the Jouvert baptism, covering each other top-to-toe with smooth, purified mud until faces and features disappear in glorious anonymity.

The music truck growls into action as we shuffle onto the road, moving together in the chip, chip, chip rhythm of the Jouvert walk. Arcs of paint fly: red, yellow, blue, and purple splattering me, the tarmac, the street signs in Pollock-esque style, and polka-dotted the roadside dancers who leave smudged imprints of a back or bottom against a pristine white wall.

Dawn streaks into the sky as we reach the hallowed, grassy Savannah. We're the first. As we cross the stage, dancing for ourselves to the empty stands, the rising sun reveals a kaleidoscope of humanity: ochre mud, technicolor paint, rich brown chocolate, slick black oil: bodies moving with snake-hipped intensity, friends hugging, everyone laughing and loving the sheer pleasure of being alive.

And three hours later, scrubbed up and clad in feathered, beaded glory, we're back on the road in the hot-hot sun for the first day of the main Carnival parades.

Polly Thomas

Trinidad's Carnival is celebrated the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday every year.

Meeting My Past at Bermuda Cup Match

Visiting her father's homeland for the first time, **Trene Todd** finds herself exactly where she belongs.

All my life, I've longed to stand tall in my culture. It was only in 2018 that I could finally say that I did. Growing up, I resonated more with my mom's rich heritage, knowing that we have Native American, Mexican, and African-American ancestry. But my dad was born in Bermuda, a British territory in the North Atlantic that's not technically Caribbean by geography, but definitely Caribbean in culture. He left the island at age seven, moving to the US. The only aspect of Bermuda that I received from him was my grandmother, who spoke with a deep Bermudian accent – a mix of British, Southern American, and Caribbean – but never talked about our family history.

It wasn't until I spent more time with my auntie, who lived across the US from me while I was growing up, that I became more curious about my culture. She had lived in Bermuda longer than my Dad and had more knowledge and experience of the island than him. The first time I visited her, in Virginia, she prepared a Bermudian brunch – cod fish and potatoes, served with banana, avocado, and tomato chutney. I was honored to know that we have our own traditional breakfast.

Shortly afterwards, she showed me a picture of my great-grandmother. I almost shed a tear, seeing how much my Dad resembled her. From that moment, I had to know more about my Dad's side of the family. When my auntie told me she was planning a visit to Bermuda in July 2018, I let her know I was interested in going with her.

We traveled to Bermuda in time for one of the island's biggest events, Cup Match.

It's centered around a heated cricket match between two island rivals, St. George's (on the east end) and Somerset (on the west end).

Alongside the friendly competition, which goes on for two days, Cup Match also falls on Emancipation Day, commemorating the end of slavery on Bermuda. Bermudians gather to celebrate with beach parties, food, and drink. Family members I've never met before welcomed me with open arms and made me feel at home.

Tasty, inviting smells of fresh-baked breads and sweets filled my cousin's house as she baked various Bermudian treats for us, such as johnny bread. I felt another connection to my heritage when I learned this sweet bread was formerly known as



journey bread, which my ancestors ate when they had a long day ahead of them. As I bit into it, I knew I was exactly where I belonged.

At Harbor Nights, the longest-running street festival in Bermuda, and the largest, we watched the famous Gombey dancers fill Front Street with their lively music and rhythmic drumming. An iconic symbol of Bermuda, these acrobatic performers base their routine on African, American Indian, Biblical, British, and West Indian lore and traditions.

Finally, Cup Match day arrived. Everyone showed up to show off in their best outfits, wearing red and blue for team Somerset (as we were), or light blue and navy blue for team St. Georges. Although it's a competition – which some locals, especially the elders, take very seriously – for me, it was more like a family reunion. My auntie pulled me over to meet a cousin here and an old family friend there. Roving with a band of cousins my own age, we drank rum swizzles and tried our hands at Crown and Anchor, a Bermudian game of chance and a Cup Match tradition.

Ordinarily I never gamble, but on this day I joined in the fun, all of us screaming every time the dealer would roll the dice that matched our bet.

With each passing day, I could feel my Bermudian blood flowing through my veins. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was a part of a culture. One of the purest moments, which I'll always hold dear to my heart, was the Bacchanal Run. I was under the assumption that this event was an actual race, but I was wrong. The sounds



of soca music filled the air as dozens of people chased each other with neon paint and powder. Locals did dance moves at the DJ's command. "Pick up something, anything!" he'd yell, and the male party goers would lift up the closest female and put her on their shoulders. By the time I left the event, my clothes were soaked in paint. I'll never forget dancing and jumping with countless locals and visitors, or the pride I felt when I saw Bermudian flags raised in the air. In those moments we were united, connected, and aligned.

I was also proud to see how much my last name meant on the island. Because the island is so small, a family name is important. I carry my grandmother's maiden name, Todd. Her mother Evie Todd was the backbone of the family, raising not only her children and her grandchildren, but also traveling the world, while her mother Kate Todd was an activist on the island.

Knowing the significance of my last name inspired me to walk with greater purpose. I left Bermuda feeling stronger, wiser, and more confident in who I am. From now on, I'll always visit Bermuda during Cup Match. I'll always be able to connect with my family, embrace my Caribbean culture, and carry on our family tradition.

Knowing the significance of my last name inspired me to walk with greater purpose. I left Bermuda feeling stronger, wiser, and more confident in who I am

Feel more when you travel, with **Stories**



UNFORGETTABLE

Bomba Workshop in Puerto Rico

"Maraca, cuá, buleador, subidor!"

We repeat the instructor's words as she stands on stage, pointing at various instruments – a rattle, a pair of wooden sticks, low-pitch and high-pitch drums. Before I can memorize them, more words follow: "seis corridos, sicá" – names of distinct beats that the drummer demonstrates for us. Learning bomba, Puerto Rico's earliest musical genre created by enslaved Africans, feels like learning a new language.

I might have missed this bomba workshop, held at *Corporación Piñones se Integra's* (COPI) community center in Loiza – the heart of Afro Puerto-Rican culture – if I hadn't contacted Local Guest. A community-focused tour enterprise, Local Guest connects visitors with immersive experiences around Puerto Rico. They'd arranged my visit with COPI's founder, Maricruz Rivera, who shared the history of Puerto Rico's African heritage and the decades of marginalization of Black *boricuas* (Puerto Ricans) in this Piñones region. In 2001, the center began reviving bomba music to preserve Afro-Puerto Rican identity and culture for future generations.

That same week, Rivera invited me back to COPI – a 15-minute drive east of Old San Juan – to join a group of US students and teachers for a bomba class.

It's time to dance and demonstrate what we've learned together. The women are handed green, red, or yellow skirts, used to express bomba's signature movements. We shake our hips while moving backwards, our hands holding our skirts out wide; we stop and sway side to side, while snapping our skirts open. With each move we make, slow or fast, the drummer beats a corresponding rhythm. Learning bomba, it turns out, isn't about words. It's about unity. *Lily Girma*



Robert Hertzog / Shutterstock.com

RESPECT AND RENEWAL: THE ART OF CURAÇAO

This small south Caribbean island has earned a big reputation for contemporary art that's as sustainable as it is meaningful. Kaila Yu offers her insights.

Although I've been a musician for most of my life, I've always felt less than gifted in the arts. Put anything other than a mic in my hands, especially a paint brush, and I become a klutz, making art in general something I both admire and fear.

But on a trip to the island of Curaçao, in the Leeward Antilles about 40mi (65km) north of Venezuela, I discover something among its rich, world-renowned community of artists, many of whom infuse their work with principles of sustainability – the healing spirit evident in the name of the island, derived from the Portuguese word for heart (*coração*).

On a day-long tour of the works of three leading artists, I find inspiration everywhere.

Garrick Marchena

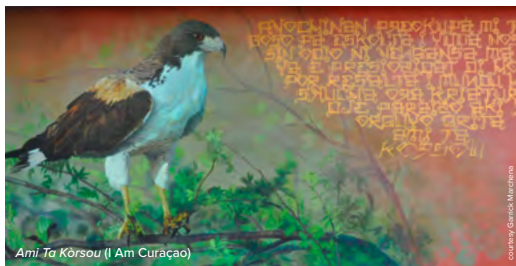
I'm in Curaçao's capital, Willemstad, a city that embraces upcycling by converting countless, deteriorating colonial buildings into dazzling new hotels and businesses. Leading our tuk-tuk brigade down the narrow back alleys of the pastel-colored Pietermaai district is street artist Garrick Marchena. The 53-year-old native paints strategically placed murals throughout the

city to raise awareness of the environmental and cultural issues the island is facing, such as the ongoing recovery from colonialism.

He stops in front of one of his most renowned works, called *Ami Ta Kòrsou* (I Am Curaçao), which features a partawal, a local white-tailed hawk that serves as a symbol of guardianship. Next to it, a poem proclaims the emancipation and healing of the city in artistic lettering inspired by indigenous cave paintings and California Cholo lettering – a gothic-style graffiti used by Mexican gangs.

Serena Janet Israel

With my art appetite whetted, the brigade



Upcycling is the lifeblood of Kirchner's work, and he's most known for his "love lights" – lanterns made from cans



heads to Serena's Art Factory. Many visitors to Curaçao will recognize the Chichi® doll souvenir, a curvaceous, black plaster sculpture of a woman created by the sprightly, energetic Serena Janet Israel – a 48-year-old German immigrant who has lived in Curaçao for more than 20 years. Each Chichi® doll is hand-molded by Israel and hand-painted by a local artist to create a one-of-a-kind original, rather than a mass-produced trinket. Sustainably extends to the mold itself, which can be reused hundreds of times. "Our Chichi® stand for decency and respect," Israel declares.

I'm invited to paint my own design on a Chichi® doll, but am doubtful of my abilities. However, once I cradle the Chichi® doll in my hand, I give my full concentration to the project. I don't seem to exhale until the last, painstakingly detailed red brush stroke, and realize that I've been in a meditative state during the entire two-hour session, leaving me energized and focused, yet completely at peace. Who knew painting could be so healing?

Andy Kirchner

We end our day at 2nd Life Curaçao, an art studio and collective located at the home

of "The Recycled Pirate" aka Andy Kirchner. Upcycling is the lifeblood of Kirchner's work, and he's most known for his "love lights" – lanterns made from cans that weren't being recycled, as recycling bins were only placed around the island as of 2016, thanks to the TUI Care Foundation.

Kirchner, a ruggedly handsome man with a salt-and-pepper beard, walks with a slight limp and a cane because of a tragic scuba-diving accident seven years ago that cost his girlfriend her life. Out of his pain came the inspiration to create 2nd Life Curaçao, which is not only focused on sustainability but is dedicated to giving a second life to the injured and disabled. We each take home a hand-hammered lantern of a heart, which now sits on my counter, reminding me to love and appreciate Mother Earth, and myself.

No trip to Curaçao is complete without a swim in the warm Caribbean waters. As I float lazily on my back, after a day fueled by art and human connection, I feel resolved to bring my new principles home with me, along with my cherished Chichi® doll, to remind me of the artist within. During my short time on this island, I was cured of my own limiting beliefs in my artistic skills.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

American Airlines, jetBlue, Air Canada, and KLM offer direct flights to Curaçao from Miami, Caracas, Amsterdam, and Newark. From Curaçao International Airport, it's a quick 15- to 20-minute taxi ride over to the Pietermaai District (around US \$35).

COSTS

Curaçao is fairly affordable, compared to its better-known sister island Aruba. For meals, local plates start at US \$6, but travelers can spend as much as US \$20-\$60 for a meal at the upscale resorts and restaurants. Keep an eye out for local, seasonal food such as Dutch pancakes or *Balchi di piska* (fried fish cakes).

There are several options for getting around Curaçao. Bus rides often cost no more than US \$1 a trip. Taxis are convenient, starting at about US \$8 a fare. Rental cars are steeper, ranging US \$30-80 a day.

Learn how to **Travel Responsibly** on your next trip



DISCOVERIES

Getty Images / Tommaso D'Amico

There's a lot of buried treasure in the Caribbean – and not all of it was left behind by pirates. Follow our nomads as they uncover the region's surprisingly affordable side, meet the locals on Saba, a rocky pinnacle of an island that abounds with personality, and witness the reemergence of a paradise devastated by a hurricane.

ON A SHOESTRING: SINT MAARTEN

Travel in the Caribbean is notoriously expensive – especially on islands known as jetset getaways. Gary Meenaghan proves it's possible for a family to stay, and enjoy, for a month without breaking the bank.

Almost as soon as I paid for the flights, I realized my mistake. While a month in Cambodia or Colombia can be enjoyed on a meager budget, no matter how cheap your tickets to the Caribbean are, 30 days of family accommodation will almost certainly turn an economical escape into an exorbitant one. Add on island taxis, imported food, and daily entertainment, and such a trip threatens to not only break the bank but also your nomadic spirit.

After a small panic, I reasoned: we were not visiting Sint Maarten for its mega-resorts nor its rib-eye steaks. The attraction was the unique 34mi² (87km²) isle, part of the Leeward Islands in the Northeast Caribbean. Divided in half and governed by two different countries – Sint Maarten by the Netherlands, and St. Martin by France – its fine-as-flour beaches and crystalline waters are complemented by arguably the world's most famous landing strip. Given all three can be enjoyed for free, Sint Maarten on a shoestring should be possible... right?

Accommodation

A cursory search online highlighted the hazards of long stays in the West Indies. All-inclusive was out of the question, but even two-star hotels were charging US \$3,000 for the month. Airbnb averaged

US \$445 a night. Eventually, after digging with all the determination of our toddler daughter and her bucket and spade, we happened across a yacht support center on the French side of the island.

Such centers are designed to offer assistance to crew members temporarily forced ashore. We had stayed in similar in Antigua, and found them both excellent and economical. Our St. Martin lodgings included a laundromat, engine repair shop, and no-frills waterfront cabins for US \$30 per night. We fell asleep each evening to the calming sound of the sea and used the free Wi-Fi while we sipped our morning coffee. Its location was not ideal, but with a car it was no problem. And in the Caribbean, it's almost always best to rent a car.

Transport

All around the Caribbean, island taxis cater almost exclusively to visitors, and the prices reflect that. Arriving at Sint Maarten's Princess Juliana Airport, we were quoted US \$30 for an 11-minute drive to our digs. Instead, we got a free shuttle to a nearby rental car office and booked a Hyundai i20 for US \$25 a day.

The other obvious benefit of a car is that it opens up the entire island. In the town of Swetes on Antigua, that had meant a



spontaneous stop opposite the Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, where a temporary roadside barbecue sold US \$10 lobster lunches. In Sint Maarten, it meant lying under incoming airplanes on Maho Beach, but also visiting various others, such as Orient Bay, Cupecoy, and Mullet Bay. On the way, we stopped at a local market and filled a small thermal bag with drinks, rather than splurging at the beachside bars.

Food

Sometimes it seems if you want to eat cheap in the Caribbean, you're stuck with fast food. Thankfully, that's an illusion – you just need to eat like a local. Visiting The Bahamas a year earlier, we discovered if you eat under the bustling bridge at Potter's Cay, rather than at the tourist-haven of Arawak, you can save more than 50% on your conch salad or jerk chicken.

In Sint Maarten, it's a similar story.

We avoided the beachfront cafes that unashamedly charge US \$15 for a simple omelette, and headed to Dish D'Lish, a family restaurant in the Simpson Bay neighborhood not far from Princess Juliana airport, where we heaped our plates with seafood pasta at the US \$10 gourmet buffet.

Entertainment

November, when we were there, is at the tail end of hurricane season, meaning low-season rates for high-season weather, but you should expect at least a couple of tropical downpours. In Sint Maarten, you'll find casino flyers everywhere that include US \$5 or \$10 vouchers – no purchase necessary. We spent a rainy evening taking turns playing 50 cent blackjack with free money. Whoever said the house always wins probably also believes it's impossible to do Sint Maarten on a shoestring. They're wrong.

TRIP NOTES

The official currency of St. Martin is Euros, and the official currency of Sint Maarten is Antillean guilders, but US dollars are accepted on both sides of the island.

Sometimes it seems if you want to eat cheap in the Caribbean, you're stuck with fast food. Thankfully, that's an illusion

Saba, an Island Packed With Character(s)

A volcanic peak pierces the clouds, while striking pinnacles lie below the sea. With one tiny road and one tiny runway, this one tiny island makes a big impression on **Sascha Zuger**.

Getting to Saba, a Dutch island in the inner arc of the Lesser Antilles, is a two-part process. After landing at Princess Juliana International Airport in Sint Maarten, about 30mi (48km) away, I stroll to the adjacent Sunset Beach Bar to await my next flight. A plane approaches and the beach (famous for its extraordinary proximity to low-flying aircraft about to land at the adjacent runway) comes to life. Loungers leap to their feet to line up below the entrance to the runway, unconsciously raising their arms in worship to the massive, roaring craft skimming above their heads. Little did I know that would be the second-most impressive airport experience of the day.

A memorable Saban welcome

The island hopper to Saba might be pricier than the ferry, but soaring over the islands, dotting the sea with their crayon-box array of blues and light greens, is an excursion in itself. A fellow passenger, the island's head-turning young doctor, points down at a little peninsula as we near.

"First visit? We'll be landing there," he says. I nod, eyes widening. "But the runway doesn't look straight..." I say. "That's the road," he says, then points down on his side of the plane, "That's the runway." I lean over and laugh in disbelief. A short, flat platform sits atop the sea – very short. I've parked my car closer at the grocery store. The little rooftop is not a fishing shack, but Juancho E. Yrausquin Airport. We'll be landing with less distance than one lap around a jogging track. It's the only time in all my travels I consider applauding a landing.

An instant family

The doctor notices Glenn, the island's Director of Tourism, waiting at the terminal to pick someone up. He introduces us – my induction into the family of Saba. Everyone here runs into everyone else multiple times a day. By choosing to share the island's beauty, travelers insert themselves into the population of 1,800, and will be waved to, called by name, and welcomed as a member of the clan.

Glenn offers me a ride, but I have a cab coming. "Donna's outside," both men



Getty Images / Jami Hancock Photography



Traditional houses in Windwardside

The hills are dotted with charming white cottages with gingerbread trim and red tile roofs

say. "How did you know my driver?" I ask. "Donna is *the* cab," says Glenn, "Though she doesn't drive at night." My mouth must have dropped, as the doctor offers, "But we just got an Uber! He does drive at night."

Cottage life

Donna, my cab driver, cheerfully offers a guided tour as we wind our way along the island's sole cliff road to my accommodation. The volcanic island has a tumultuous past – fights between shipwrecked Englishmen, Dutchmen, native Amerindians, and famous pirates such as Henry Morgan mark its history, though trouble is now as dormant as the island's eruptions. The "Unspoiled Queen" even scared away Columbus with its jagged coast. With most of the men

becoming sailors, the women became strong and independent in their absence, running farms, maintaining the island, and creating necessities and textiles such as the famous Saban lace.

Donna invites me to join her daughter and the "ladies who lace" at their weekly sewing circle at Kakona Saba, a local initiative in Windwardside. Women ranging in age from 14 to 92 gather to share lace patterns and the latest gossip.

The hills are dotted with charming white cottages with gingerbread trim and red tile roofs. Flowers spill from yards onto the roadside, spiking the air with a heady scent. Donna pulls into Compass Cottage, my airy and inviting home for the week. It's Dutch perfection, precisely efficient, with →

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Saba village

Diving Saba

a wraparound porch and swaying palms on the pool deck overlooking the sea and the distant island of St. Eustatius. It's utter serenity, broken only by the soft bleating of baby miniature goats rustling through the hillside jungle.

Mark, my temporary landlord, stops in with coffee, cheese, and wine. As many here do, he pairs this multi-generational family business with his true passion as an upscale jewelry designer who travels the world during the rainy season collecting rare gems and stones – and occasionally handsome partners – to inspire his next collection. (His exquisite pieces are on show at historical Jewel Cottage in Windwardside.)

On Donna's advice, I stroll up the hill to Jobean Chamber's glass-blowing and bead shop for a workshop in the meditative art. I find myself sneaking off to the studio to chat and for mesmerizing sessions behind melting Venetian glass throughout my stay.

Diving into activities

While parking poolside with a book is tempting, I'm more enticed by Saba's legendary pinnacles and wall diving. (In

lieu of beach time, landlubbers can trek to the Kingdom of the Netherlands' highest point, accompanied by famous local guide Crocodile James, who happily machetes his way up Mt. Scenery, sharing info on botanicals and inappropriate island tales in equal measure.)

I opt for Sea Saba, a PADI Resort and Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) Field Station. Co-founder Lynn also started, with Johanna of Juliana's, the annual Sea & Learn on Saba program.

Lynn organizes breathtaking dives to key sites including Eye of the Needle, Third Encounter (named one of *Sport Diver's* Top 10 Dive Sites), Outer Limits, and Tent Reef Wall. Horseshoe-shaped underwater mountains, deep-blue needle pinnacles, and plateaus rich with soft corals and sponges invite snappers, butterfly and damselfish to linger.

But even the free-swimming chain of moray eels are trumped by sleeping nurse sharks, massive grouper, and a brief glimpse of a passing manta ray. During a safety stop, a curious Caribbean reef shark offers a quick hello, yet another Saban resident ensuring we feel at home.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

The Edge, a high-speed ferry, travels from Sint Maarten to Saba Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. The morning route to Saba (9am) returns in the afternoon (3:30pm) to allow for daytrips. Rates: US \$100 (adults) and \$60 (children) roundtrip, US \$65/\$38 one way.

The Dawn II ferry travels from Saba to Sint Maarten Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. The morning route to Sint Maarten (7am) returns in the afternoon (4:30pm). Rates: US \$110 (adults) and \$55 (children) roundtrip, US \$55/\$35 one way.

Winair offers four or more daily flights. Fares depend on date and availability (USD \$83-\$132).



UNFORGETTABLE

Guavaberries, a Caribbean Christmas Carol

For me, it's not the holidays without a healthy dose of guavaberry liqueur. I've celebrated Christmas nearly every year with family on St. John in the US Virgin Islands, and this Yuletide beverage is as traditional as Santa's milk and cookies.

The sweet, but strong, rum-based brew is the product of a centuries-old eastern Caribbean tradition steeped in song, celebration, and secrecy. Groves of guavaberries, which appear year to year, are as transient as Scrooge's generosity, and are closely guarded family secrets.

Our go-to source is Lucia Henley's stand, off Highway 32 in the East End of St. Thomas, another of the US Virgin Islands. Henley is among the most prolific purveyors of the homemade drink, and visitors can find her stand well-stocked from November through December with guavaberry liqueur, jams, and pies.

A song, "Good mornin', good mornin', ah come for me guavaberry..." speaks to the island custom of caroling house to house in exchange for a sample of that family's stash, and Henley always sings a few lines of the tune as she offers me a taste of her concoction. It's special, like a fine brandy, and is traditionally passed between carolers and revelers in the same way as wassail – the mulled wine drink of Medieval Christmastime. Our favorite way to imbibe is after caroling and Christmas Eve events on St. John, following Santa's visit – by boat – in downtown Cruz Bay.

Ashley Winchester

Barbuda's Road to Recovery

In 2017, Hurricane Irma unleashed widespread destruction on this island paradise. Traveling there in 2018, **Gary Meenaghan** found signs of the storm all around. Here's why he feels Barbuda is still well worth a visit.

Barbuda, with its pink-shell beaches and picture-perfect palm trees, was Princess Diana's East Caribbean escape whenever she sought to lose the paparazzi. Now, two years since Hurricane Irma, it's an island trying to repair its recent past and recover a paradise lost.

Part of the Lesser Antilles, and located on the outer arc of the West Indies, Barbuda was directly in the path of the Category 5 storm. When Irma visited in the early hours of September 6, 2017, Barbuda suffered 95% devastation. Winds of up to 185mph (298kph) decimated everything from homes and hotels, to schools, the airport, and the community's only hospital. Neither running water nor electricity survived, and the island's steel phone tower folded in two as if it were made of chicken wire. The Prime Minister, Gaston Browne, called the island "uninhabitable" and ordered its 1,500 residents be evacuated.

Gradual recovery

The island and its people are rising again, but it has been a slow process. When I visited with my young family in November 2018, officials estimated 75% of the population had returned. Yet as we arrived for a day trip, no other travelers were on the catamaran that shuttles passengers between Barbuda and its sister isle Antigua. Instead, we bounced up and down alongside only sleepy-eyed laborers and smartly dressed NGO workers.

It was a sharp contrast to bustling Antigua, 39mi (63km) south, which avoided severe damage by Irma. Much of Barbuda still felt barren and broken. Flooded dirt roads forced our driver to weave between potholes, uprooted trees, boulders, and wild donkeys. Fences lay flattened. Abandoned beachside cottages featured thick cracks running across their interior walls like varicose veins. A grandiose hotel close to Pink Sand Beach sat empty, save for a chandelier made of shells.

Unrivaled natural beauty

Yet, despite all this, it's possible to enjoy Barbuda's unrivaled beauty – and in doing so, pump a little money into an economy in desperate need of exactly that. About 4.5mi (7km) south of the ferry terminal, on deserted Princess Diana Beach – so named in 2011 to mark what would have been the late royal's 50th birthday – we sipped from coconuts hand-picked by our driver and swam in the crystalline Caribbean Sea. We

snorkeled with schools of tropical fish, and with a bit more luck, would have been able to spot sea turtles, barracuda, rays, and a variety of other marine creatures.

Back on land and alone for as far as the eye can see, it's easy to pretend you're shipwrecked on an uninhabited island. *Condé Nast Traveler* named Pink Sand Beach the 14th most beautiful in the world, while at the lagoon close to Codrington, Barbuda's largest town, you can find the largest frigate breeding and nesting colony outside the Galápagos, with around 2,500 birds.

Boosting the economy

Happily, it's not only the birds who are flocking back. As of September 2019, half of the island's 1,200 properties have been rebuilt, according to Prime Minister Browne. Accommodation options remain limited, but they were never abundant. Beach bungalows have reopened, there's a handful of homestay and Airbnb options, and a luxury resort located at the northern end of 11 Mile Beach has reopened to rapturous international reviews. Princess Diana Beach has started hosting idyllic weddings again, and popular steel-band music nights and Caribbean cooking classes have even returned to the island.

If in doubt that even a basic day trip can help a community get back on to its feet, consider this: as we headed to the wharf to catch the catamaran back to Antigua, our driver stopped at his house to drop off some construction materials. Exiting his black pick-up, he motioned towards the empty shell of a suburban bungalow; its roof just a series of exposed wooden rafters. "That's home," he said. "But until I can afford to finish the repairs, I sleep there..." We followed his gaze to the right of the house, where a white, UN-provided tent stood erect in the garden.

These are the people our tourism dollars can help.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

The Barbuda Express – catchphrase: "A to B by Sea" – leaves from Antigua's Heritage Quay six days a week at 7am, takes 90 minutes, and returns at 4:30pm. A round trip costs US \$55. It's often possible, and sometimes cheaper, to charter a 15-minute flight from Antigua for up to six people.

DAY TOURS

As of September 2019, day tours can be organized for US \$145 per person and include the ferry, a lobster lunch on Pink Sand Beach, and visits to the Frigate Bird Sanctuary, Princess Diana Beach, and various caves with petroglyphs and stalactites. See Barbudaful.net for more details.



Frigate bird



Pink Beach, Barbuda

Hawksbill turtle



Getty Images / BrandMaster

WILDLIFE & NATURE

The tropical and subtropical climate of the Caribbean makes it a thriving habitat for birds and rainforest animals, while its warm waters are ideal breeding grounds for coral. Join our travelers as they visit remote mountaintops and bird sanctuaries in the Dominican Republic, and discover the rich marine life of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, the world's second-largest barrier reef system.

THE HIDDEN DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

From a homestay in a small coastal town to birding on remote cays and holing up in a cabin at 7,000ft (2,130m) above sea level, Lily Girma finds a side of the country few know exists.

When I was writing a guide book on the Dominican Republic (DR), located between Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Greater Antilles, I traveled around the country for a year. My mission was to unearth immersive experiences, away from the DR's resort towns. Over the months that followed, exploring the country south to north and center, I stumbled on a world of locally run accommodations, community tours, and breathtaking island scenery.

A rural adventure in Barahona

My explorations lead me to *Cooperativa para el Desarrollo de la Ciénaga* in the southwestern province of Barahona. Aurelino, the cooperative's tour guide, gives me specific instructions to reach their community center: catch a Caribe Tours bus from Santo Domingo to Barahona town, then transfer to a *guagua* or local bus. I'm to tell the driver to drop me off "*donde la cooperativa de La Ciénaga*," another hour east.

The first three-hour ride takes me into the campo, or countryside, past vast plantain

fields and roadside fruit vendors, until we enter bustling Barahona. The second chicken-bus ride takes my breath away as it winds down a narrow, coastal highway flanked by green hills and an iridescent blue sea.

Aurelino and two of the cooperative's women – including my host for the night, Dona Paulina, and her daughter – welcome me off the bus.

"The house isn't far, we can walk there," Paulina's daughter says. We descend a small hill into a neighborhood. I spot a yard filled with plastic chairs and children running around screaming, balloons in hands.

"It's my goddaughter's birthday. We'll stop by for a few minutes," says Dona Paulina.

Directly across is her single-story house, where I leave my bags. At the birthday bash, Latin tunes blast while the kids show off their moves. Strangers kiss me hello on the cheek, and I'm handed a plate of food. I don't understand their rapid-fire Dominican Spanish, but I feel as welcome as a neighbor.



I can't take my eyes off the water: it's a crystalline turquoise more striking than the Caribbean Sea

At sunset, La Ciénaga's tiny waterfront fills with residents. Fishermen canoes are parked on the beach, and families swim or play basketball. Aurelino takes me on a quick boat ride along La Ciénaga's scenic coastline under an orange sky.

The next morning, over breakfast, Dona Paulina and I talk about the cooperative life, and the sustainable income they've generated for the community from the restaurant, homestays, a marmalade-making venture, and the selling of adventure tours.

At 9am, Aurelino picks me up to begin our adventure to Balneario La Plaza – a three-hour hike along the Bahoruco River. A bumpy safari truck takes us into a thick, humid forest to the river entry point. I can't take my eyes off the water: it's a crystalline turquoise more striking than the Caribbean Sea. Climbing over rocks, and cooling in freshwater pools, we eventually reach

a massive canyon. I gasp looking at a secluded turquoise pool a few feet below. Aurelino smiles ear to ear and leaps into the water, screaming: "*¡Paraíso!*" Paradise!

Offshore escape to a wildlife refuge

My journey continues to the DR's northwestern edge – past cactus-lined roads, salt ponds, and goats grazing off the highway. I know I've reached Monte Cristi when I spot El Morro – the town's 700ft (213m) limestone mesa overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Locals flock there at sunset for its golden, sand-and-pebble beach at the base of the mesa. I do the same, before I make my way back to the waterfront area where roadside bars blast music and serve cold beer, while kids swim off the dock.

In the morning, Soraya y Santo Tours, a husband-and-wife team native to Monte Cristi, take me on a boat trip to the *Cayos Siete Hermanos* (Seven Brother Cays), 1.5 →



Valle Nuevo National Park

hours off the shores of Monte Cristi, near the border with Haiti.

As the boat's captain explains, shouting over the motor, the major draw is Cayo Tuna. Every year from June to August, migratory birds nest in this wildlife refuge area – three species of seabirds known as the Brown Noddy, Sooty Tern, and Least Tern.

Anchored off Cayo Tuna, wading onto shore, my ears fill with piercing sounds. Thousands upon thousands of birds are perched on leafy bushes covering most of the isle – my sole companions on this deserted, white sand circle in the middle of the Atlantic.

Overnight in a cloud forest

Warming up by my cabin chimney, I chuckle that I'm experiencing cold weather in the Caribbean. I'm at Villa Pajón, a Dominican family-owned lodge tucked inside Valle Nuevo National Park.

Perched on a plateau at 7,000ft (2,130m), near the center of the DR, and surrounded

by dense pine forests, the warmest daytime temperatures hover at 70°F (21°C). Evenings drop into the 50s and can reach below freezing in December. For naturalists, Valle Nuevo is a paradise of plants and wildlife, including more than 70 bird species.

I spend the day hiking with Señor Guzmán, whose family has owned this property for generations. A short trail behind the lodge leads us through a maze of giant criollo pine trees, ferns, and bromeliads in a cloud forest. I feel transported into another universe, when my host tells me to stop.

"You hear that alarm sound? It's the *jilguero*." The Rufous-throated Solitaire, a tropical bird native to the region.

A bowl of fresh *sancocho* – a hearty meat -and-root-vegetable stew – warms us up over lunch at the lodge. Walking back to my cabin for a nap by the chimney, I realize that I've succeeded – I had found the Dominican Republic I want others to see.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

Fly into Santo Domingo, Puerto Plata, or Santiago international airports to make your way to Barahona, Monte Cristi, and Valle Nuevo, respectively. Major car rental offices are available on site; highways are modern and well indicated, but watch for speeding drivers. Regional bus service is available on Caribe Tours to Barahona and Monte Cristi, with scheduled daily departures listed online. Valle Nuevo in Constanza requires a four-wheel drive.



Robert Harvey / David Neubauer

UNFORGETTABLE

Feria de Río Tigre

Held on Isla Tigre, in the north of Panama's Guna Yala archipelago, is Feria de Río Tigre, a four-day craft fair. As one of the last indigenous tribes of the Caribbean, the Guna gained independence from Panama in the 1925 revolution. They became the first autonomous indigenous group in Latin America, which has allowed them to retain their enchanting culture.

Drawing Guna from their remote islands, the fair has an inclusive, community feel as they teach each other and visitors the crafts of pottery, sewing *molás* – colorful appliqué clothing unique to the Guna – and geometric, beaded bracelets called *chaquiras*.

I'm treated to a magical *Nogagope* performance, an intimate, spiritual dance between couples to bamboo flutes and maracas. Dedicated to Mother Earth, the ritualistic dance is intended to keep evil spirits away. The couples line up to face each other, slowly hopping back and forth diagonally to the rhythm. Dressed in *molás*, the women begin to spin, with their flowing, dark hair echoing the sensual moment of the dance.

The day wraps up with a feast of enormous, meaty lobster and delicate, sweet crab followed by fresh coconuts. No frills, just locally foraged foods as I discuss Guna traditions with my new friends. *Lucy Pierce*

Feria de Río Tigre is held in mid-October.

Hog Heaven in Honduras

PADI Divemaster **Sascha Zuger** is enticed by the Bay Islands not because of their beaches or coconut-cocktail bars, but because they're home to the world's second-largest reef system and the idyllic, little-known Cayos Cochinos.

As recently as 20 years ago, visitors to Roatan would have enjoyed deserted white sand beaches and pristine reefs. Today, the 10mi² (50km²) island, off the coast of Honduras, is one of the busiest cruise ship destinations in the world, ushering in more than a million passengers a year. I quickly realize my dreams of the untouched Meso-American Barrier Reef will require a day trip to Cayos Cochinos, aka the Hog Islands. We set sail for our 25mi (40km) journey accompanied by a pod of frolicking spinner dolphins – surely an auspicious start.

Seamounts of Cayos Cochinos

It's a real treat to stop enroute for a snorkel, or advanced dive, seemingly in the middle of the ocean – 45 minutes by power boat or a few hours by leisurely sail from Roatan. Seamounts are underwater mountains, jutting up more than 3,280ft (1,000m) from the ocean floor, stopping just short of breaking the surface and earning the title of "island". The topography creates currents awash with plankton, attracting open-seafaring creatures including rays, sharks, and sportfish, as well as a protected habitat so remote that many species are endemic, existing only in this microcosm.

We tie up to a mooring line to protect the fragile system, and back-roll from the boat into paradise. Dropping to 100ft (30m) we're rewarded with schools of horse eye jack and barracuda feasting on shimmering silversides. Nearby, dinner-plate sized Atlantic spadefish flash their zebra stripes as they feed on plankton in the water column. The mountain's pinnacle drops off into

deep-blue fathoms, and ridges covered in pink sea fans and coral nooks.

Streams of violet-blue creole wrasse swirl around a coral pillar as we move toward the shallows below the snorkelers. Their exclamations echo down as they point at a sea turtle popping up for a breath. Nosing over the edge of the ridge, a docile, inquisitive nurse shark greets us as we reluctantly return to the sailboat and continue on to the Hog Islands.

Cayo Grande

Soon, Cayo Grande comes into view, the largest of the two main islands (plus 13 tiny coral islets). Lush greenery covers a large hill edged by golden beach. As our boat nears, several *cayucos* (hand-carved wooden



Meso-American Barrier Reef

TRIP NOTES

DAY TRIPS: Note, sea conditions must be ideal/near flat for most boats to comfortably make the trip.

A variety of operators in Roatan offer sailing and powerboat tours, with activities including scuba diving, snorkeling, fishing, and visits to Chachahuete village. Trips average 8.5 hours and typically include lunch, drinks, and snacks. Prices range from US \$135-180.

boats) head our way, one with a makeshift sail to harness the sea breeze. Smiling locals offer goods for sale – hand-rolled cigars, carefully wrapped, fresh coconut bread – and an invitation to visit their village. The Cayos archipelago doesn't have any cars, roads, or bikes and is home to 100 inhabitants, most Garifuna (descendants of Carib Indians and Africans) who live simply without running water or electricity.

We land on the beach and hike through a jungle that's home to the world's only pink boa constrictors. Although we don't spot the rare creatures, from the summit lighthouse we can clearly see Cayo Menor across the bay, where a research center, supported by non-profits including the renowned Smithsonian Institute and World Wildlife Fund, offers a base for visiting scientists.

We wander over to Cayo Chachahuete for a bite and a chat with the islanders. This sand-spit village of palm-thatched roof huts and hammocks offers some of the only overnight accommodations on Cayos. We sip *Salva Vida* beers as our hand-line caught snappers and plantains are fried to order.

A very big surprise in store

After a dive off Cayos Grande – where we spot sea turtles, lobsters, eagle rays, soft corals, and century-old purple barrel sponge – we head back to Roatan. As we're dozing in the salt spray and sun, the boat slows. The captain motions to the crew – a straight hand to his forehead, then arms as wide as his smile. They rush for confirmation and hustle us into our fins and masks. We've happened upon the world's largest fish, the whale shark, tipping the scales at 41,000lbs (6,350kg), and up to 60ft (19m) long.

As the captain positions us in the shark's path, we slip into the water, equally thrilled that we have encountered the rare, gentle giant and that, as a filter-feeding shark, we are entirely off its menu. The slow-moving creature glides along beside us. We keep a 9ft (3m) distance and stay calm to avoid



Swimming with a whale shark

spooking it into a dive, its steady gaze and striking spots and stripes seared into our memory. The sheer enormity of the creature, after a day already filled with otherworldly adventures, leaves us in awe as we quietly reboard the boat. The captain offers to drop in lines to fish on the final stretch home, but we decline. The sea has already given us more than we could ever want.

UNFORGETTABLE

Restoring a Coral Reef in Bonaire

Weighed down by scuba gear and floating just above the sandy ocean floor, I carefully tie a string, dangling a coral fragment, to the branch of a “tree” in a coral nursery. The tree is made of thin, metal cross bars attached to a thicker post – coral fragments hang from each bar like Christmas ornaments. Around me, divers gently brush juvenile coral to remove algae and predators, while others clip, restring, and rehang fragments – which grow an inch a month – on the trees. The corals are clipped every few months, so they produce new coral as they grow.

These coordinated efforts are all part of a Discover Reef Renewal Dive with Reef Renewal Foundation Bonaire. We’re helping to restore the coral that surrounds the island and provides habitats to myriad marine life. After all, the reefs are what draw divers from around the world to this small, Dutch Caribbean island around 50mi (80km) north of Venezuela.

Reef Renewal Foundation Bonaire was founded in 2012 with a mission to protect and restore the coral reefs within the Bonaire National Marine Park, which was established in 1979 and surrounds the island entirely. Currently, some 13,000 individual corals are grown in Reef Renewal Foundation Bonaire’s eight nurseries, and more than 24,000 corals have been outplanted back to the reefs. The foundation invites certified scuba divers who are interested in volunteering to complete a training course and assist with the nursery, maintenance, and outplanting corals to restoration sites around Bonaire and Klein Bonaire.

As someone who’s been passionate about marine life since learning to snorkel in Hawaii as a little girl, I was thrilled to participate in a Discover Reef Renewal Dive and do my part to help preserve Bonaire’s coral reefs for future generations. *Susan Barnes*



© Reef Renewal Foundation



ADVENTURE

Vermont Nature Trail, St. Vincent

Diving isn't the only worthwhile activity in these parts. Our nomads will lure you off the beach to snorkel at an effervescent reef and rappel down a waterfall. They'll take you racing on an America's Cup yacht, climbing to the peak of an active volcano, or exploring the eerie remains of a town engulfed by one.

Keeping the America's Cup Spirit Alive on Sint Maarten

Sailing a retired racing boat in the 12 Metre Regatta, **Tim Harper** finds himself in a tense competition with arguably the most famous racing yacht in history.

It's a good day for sailing off Sint Maarten, one of the Leeward Islands in the northeast Caribbean – sunny and 80°F (26°C), with a fresh breeze. I join the crowd of travelers on the main pier at the capital city, Philipsburg.

I have sailed a bit, but most of us are non-sailors who've heard about the St. Maarten 12 Metre Regatta – essentially a mini-version of the America's Cup races that have long captivated an audience beyond hardcore sailors. The 12 Metre has won many awards for being one of the best “soft adventures” in the Caribbean. But it wasn't so soft for some of us.

A handful of 12 Metre staffers work the crowd, dividing us into two crews of 15, with comparable numbers of young adults, older people, and children. Each crew boards a launch and is ferried to its yacht. My group steps onto *True North IV*.

The yacht's tanned young captain spots my triathlon t-shirt and assigns me the most physically demanding job on the boat, one of four “grinders,” furiously cranking lines in and out on big spools as the sails are re-set.

Two other professional crew, equally young and tanned, give orders to the rest of us. Everyone has a task – one elderly lady

After more than an hour, we ragtag visitors feel like a real crew. It's time to race the other 12, which has been zig-zagging across the harbor



is named timekeeper – and we realize it's up to us to sail this very fast boat.

Which is no easy job. The 12-metre yachts, historically “the greyhounds of the sea,” are beautifully sleek but finicky vessels built for speed, not comfort, nearly 70ft (21m) long with an 86ft (26m) mast, weighing 35 tons (31,750kg) and flying 1,700ft² (158m²) of sail. (The “12 metre” classification comes not from the yacht's length, but from an equation based on several measurements, including the distance from deck to water.)

The 12s were the official boat of the America's Cup until 1987, when the sports world was riveted by the dramatic races off Fremantle, Australia that resulted in a victory by the New York Yacht Club's entry, *Stars & Stripes*, arguably the most famous racing yacht in history. For the 1988 Cup, the specifications were changed, and the future of the 12-metre yachts dimmed.

Ivy, as our crew calls our boat, was one of five 12s rescued by the St. Maarten

oudfitters and brought to the Caribbean to do what they were built to do: race.

After more than an hour, we ragtag visitors feel like a real crew. It's time to race the other 12, which has been zig-zagging across the harbor, training its crew, too. The course is five legs of about 1mi (1.6km) each, compared with the typical 22m (35km) America's Cup race.

As the yachts maneuver toward the start line, the other 12 comes close enough for us to glimpse its name.

Astonished, I look at the captain. “Is that...?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “That's *Stars & Stripes*.”

We help our timekeeper count down, and swoosh across the start line seconds ahead of *Stars & Stripes*.

After one tack (turn into the wind) about 30 minutes into the race, our captain frowns. “We're behind,” he says. “They've positioned themselves to take our wind.” We can catch up only with a series of sharp tacks. “It's a lot

more work,” he warns us grinders.

The next 10 minutes are a mix of concentration and perspiration as *True North IV* sweeps back and forth. In a decisive move, the yachts appear to be headed toward the same spot on the water from sharply opposing angles.

Heeling at 15°, salt spray in our faces, our boat moving so fast we can hear the bow slicing through the waves, we cut in front of *Stars & Stripes* at a right angle, almost close enough to reach out and touch its bow.

The good-natured jeers from *Stars & Stripes* fade as we move away. Another quick tack, and we glide across the finish line, half a length ahead.

“We did it,” the skipper exults. “A slam dunk.” Our shipmates raise a round of cheers for us grinders. I close my eyes, savoring the sea and sun. When I open them, the young skipper is smiling at me. “Hey,” he says quietly. “We just beat *Stars & Stripes*.”

TRIP NOTES

The St. Maarten 12-Metre Regatta is based on the main pier at Philipsburg, near Bobby's Marina, and at www.12metre.com.

Races begin at 8:30am most days, and continue through the day with up to four additional races, depending on demand, at 10am, 11:30am, 1pm, and 2pm.

The cost is US \$90 for adults, and US \$65 for children nine and older. Reservations through the website are recommended, but walkups on the pier will be accommodated if there's room.

The yachts have undergone minor renovations for safety, but not comfort. There is no head (bathroom) on board. People with disabilities should inquire about accessibility.

The typical race experiences takes two to two-and-a-half hours, not counting a complimentary rum punch afterwards in the 12 Metre Regatta's club house.

Sailing can be a dangerous sport. Wear your safety equipment including a life vest, don't mix sailing with alcohol or drugs, and stay aware at all times of your surrounds and the changing weather. Check your travel insurance policy for more details.

La Soufrière: Hiking St. Vincent's Volcano

High above the island's idyllic white-sand beaches looms the still-active volcano that created it. **Bill Fink** braves the windswept climb to its peak.

It feels like the end of the earth — or the beginning. Billowing fog obscures my sight, whipping winds rattle my rain jacket, and mud coats my shoes as they crunch on black lava rock. Bright green grasses cling to the trail beside me on knife-edge cliffs, looming above the crater of the still-active La Soufrière volcano on the island of St. Vincent.

Sulphurous Soufrière

The scene atop La Soufrière is as it could have been hundreds of thousands of years ago, when it belched forth mountains of lava to birth the island from the depths of the Caribbean Sea. The lava was accompanied by vast, sulphurous clouds of gas, for which the now 4,049ft (1,234m) mountain was named. Eons later, the volcano has

As I ponder La Soufrière's destructive power, the mists part to reveal the majesty of La Soufrière's creation

calmed and the island is covered in tropical greenery from peaks to craters.

La Soufrière's eruptions continued periodically, including the 1902 disaster that killed more than 1,500 people. Tracking stations now monitor the volcano, safely enabling evacuations well before the most recent eruptions in the 1970s. After its 40 years of relative dormancy, I can't even smell La Soufrière's eponymous sulfur fumes while standing right above the crater.

As I ponder La Soufrière's destructive power, the mists part to reveal the majesty of La Soufrière's creation. The island of St. Vincent spreads 360° around me, a tropical paradise of flowering trees, soft green hills, clear mountain streams, and majestic waterfalls, ringed by white and black sand beaches, lapped by the calm blue waters of the Caribbean.

Looking into the crater, I survey a primeval setting of waterfalls tumbling down black rock cliffs, multi-hued lakes, and a towering jungle straight out of Jurassic Park. I half-expect a T-Rex to burst from the banana trees and chase skittering herds of prey. It is a spectacular, other-worldly setting that makes the challenging hike to the top well worth the effort.

Climbing the volcano

My trip started in the capital of Kingstown, about an hour's drive to the base of La Soufrière. I had booked a guided hike with Sailors Wilderness Tours. While the trails up La Soufrière are fairly well marked, a



St. Vincent



La Soufrière



Crater's edge at La Soufrière

licensed guide is not only required for visitors, but beneficial to ensure you stay on the best path, and to provide an education about the volcano and St. Vincent along the way.

Our hike begins at the trailhead partway up on the windward side of the island (there's a longer and steeper trail on the leeward side). We walk alongside a banana plantation, to see bunches of bananas wrapped in bug-proof, blue netting that makes them look like Christmas gifts for monkeys. We stroll along a wide, clear path, slowly ascending on small foothills

divided by gently flowing streams. The hot, humid climate requires multiple water breaks at basic, covered rest stops.

As we progress, the temperature cools, and we enter the Cloud Forest zone of the mountain, bathed in near perpetual mist, providing a serene setting, but making the trail a bit slippery. Our guide collects walking sticks for us, helping our balance and making us feel like intrepid explorers.

We ascend the steeper, rocky upper zone of the mountain in clouds of fog, glad for our experienced guide. The wind and misting rain increases, as if La Soufrière is actively trying to keep us from her summit. Poking with sticks, shuffling our boots, huffing and puffing, we make it to the crater rim, where the spirit of La Soufrière blows a few final powerful gusts, then relents to part the clouds and reveal her natural majesty.

Reluctantly descending from the peak, we reflect on the rewards of leaving the beaches to explore the wild side of St. Vincent. We now have a deeper understanding of the nature of the island, as well as a good excuse to enjoy a well-deserved rum cocktail back at the beach bar.



Sulphur Springs, La Soufrière

TRIP NOTES

The trailhead to La Soufrière is about an hour's drive from the capital city of Kingstown. From there, it's about a two-hour climb to the crater rim. The trail is often wet and crosses streams, as well as rough, rocky patches, so wear sturdy, water-resistant footwear, and bring a walking stick and plenty of water. While the trail begins in hot, humid jungle, the weather on top can be very windy and chilly, so it's wise to bring a light rain jacket.

Hikers must comply with all rules and guidelines set out by the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines' National Parks: no glass bottles, alcohol, smoking, or loud music is permitted on the trails, and it is required for non-residents to hike with a certified guide. I was happy with Sailors' Wilderness Tours (US \$95 for the six-hour trip and lunch, including transport), and other local options are available. For more information, see the National Parks website (<http://nationalparks.gov.vc>) or the national tourism website at discoversvg.com.



UNFORGETTABLE

Conch Festival

Put a shell up to your ear, and you'll hear the sea. Listen to Triton's Trumpet, and you'll hear the Caribbean.

Every November, the British Overseas Territory of Turks and Caicos, some 575mi (925km) south of Miami, Florida, celebrates its edible trumpets. Visitors and "belongers" (locals) conch it up at the Conch Festival, held at Blue Hills on the island of Providenciales. Festivities include a conch fritter-eating contest, a conch-knocking contest, a conch-peeling competition, and a conch-blowing tournament. The winner of this last, prestigious event must produce a recognizable tune. When I entered, I produced a plumbing anomaly. I left the cooking to the experts.

The conch is known as Triton's Trumpet after the Greek god of the sea. It's favored by merpeople – maids and men. When Columbus discovered conch on Turks and Caicos in 1492, he described the shells as "the size of a calf head". Along with the spiny lobster and the flamingo, the conch is featured prominently on the islands' coat of arms. It must be the world's only heraldic mollusc. Conch is a cult.

Having eaten conch (Strombus) in its fried, smoked, frittered, and pecan-encrusted form, I soon developed many of the famous attributes of the Caribbean marine snail. After conching it up, you don't move very far. Or very quickly. *Kevin Pilley*

The Turks and Caicos Conch Festival is held on the last weekend of November.

THE “NATURE ISLAND”: 4 ECO- ADVENTURES ON DOMINICA

With its diverse sea life, 365 rivers, and nine active volcanoes, Dominica is rich in natural wonders – and sustainable ways to enjoy it all. **Lola Mendez** makes the most of them.

This 29mi (47km) long, 16mi (26km) wide island, one of the Lesser Antilles in the Eastern Caribbean, was dubbed with the Latin word for Sunday by Christopher Columbus in 1493. Roseau is its major port and capital city. Environmental sustainability is inherent here. It was the first nation to be certified by the Green Globe program for sustainable development in 2005. This adoration of nature has made the island a phenomenal place for eco-adventures.

Visiting the hot springs

Dominica has one of the world's highest concentrations of dormant volcanoes, which lend themselves to epic hikes such as the famous Boiling Lake trek, an 8-hour round trip with an elevation of 2,600 ft (790m).

After exploring Dominica's mountainous terrain, I'm eager to soothe my body in the natural, hot sulfur springs the island is known for. I stroll between heated dipping pools, mud oozing between my toes, at the locally owned Ti Kwen Glo Cho in Wotten Waven,

an unpretentious outdoor spa in the middle of the jungle, but only a 15-minute drive from the capital, Roseau. I'm the only foreigner here, but am warmly welcomed by locals.

After soaking in the hot water pools, I dash into freezing freshwater, streaming out of an industrial pipe to form a shower. Indigenous flowers scent the air as I settle in for a long, warm soak in the rustic, outdoor copper tub, with the cascading waterfall in the background as my soundtrack.

Snorkeling at Champagne Reef

I have heard about Dominica's Champagne Reef, one of the few places on earth where it's possible to snorkel above a volcano. I'm with the responsible tour operator Nature Island Dive, and I'm not sure what to expect, but am hoping to see the effervescence caused by geothermal activity.

Our expert snorkeling guide, Dizzy, picks up her speed and fins towards a scene straight out of a nature film. Nature herself is tickling me, as I joyfully swim through the

A series of thrilling jumps, rappels, and rock slides gets us down the face of six waterfalls and into cool natural pools

It's important to check you've purchased the right level of travel insurance cover and have the appropriate qualifications for your chosen adventure sport before you leave home. Still not sure if you're covered? Check your policy for more details.



Rainforest waterfall

rare phenomena of small gas bubbles rising from the volcanic seafloor. The venting attracts a slew of sea creatures and I see a school of squid for the first time, and catch a glimpse of an octopus, scorpionfish, and a sea turtle near the Scott's Head Peninsula.

Lessons in rappelling down a waterfall

There are more than 12 officially named waterfalls in Dominica, and it's possible to rappel down the cascades. I join a beginner's course with Extreme Dominica, and after gearing up, we receive training on how to rappel across a canyon, starting with an 8ft (2.5m) ledge, which helps take the edge off my reasonable fear of jumping from taller heights.

The terrain is easy to traverse – just a moderate fitness level is needed, and there's an 11-year-old on our tour. We hike through the verdant jungle into a canyon and make our way along a mossy gorge. A series of thrilling jumps, rappels, and

rock slides gets us down the face of six waterfalls and into cool natural pools. It's intimidating and adrenaline-inducing at times – especially during a hair-raising, 25ft (8m) jump off a waterfall.

Foraging for food with a local chef

I'm vegan, and foraging is one of my favorite travel experiences – to me, one of the best ways to discover a destination is through its food. I meet Grant Lynott, executive chef of Zing Zing restaurant at the Secret Bay eco-resort, on a backyard-to-table nature walk, harvesting ingredients for a meal straight from the source.

Armed with a wicker basket and a pair of gardening shears, we peruse the resort's organic food gardens. We pluck hibiscus flowers and wild herbs for seasoning, including moringa, sorrel, and bay leaves. I'm surprised to discover there are plants I had no idea were edible, including papaya seeds, which can be used to make pepper, and love trying their unique flavors.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE
Several local airlines fly to Dominica from other Caribbean islands. There are occasional ferries from Martinique, Guadeloupe, and St. Lucia. Hire a car with a driver to get around Dominica.

HOT SPRINGS
Wotten Waven is 15 minutes from Roseau. Entrance for visitors is US \$10. You can store your belongings at the covered benches by each pool.

SNORKELING AT CHAMPAGNE BEACH
Snorkel tours are US \$30 a person including equipment, Marine Park fees, and a trained guide. Guided kayak snorkel tours are US \$50 per person. Groups of four or more can be picked up in Roseau for an additional US \$25 per person.

RAPPELLING WATERFALLS
A half-day tour starts at US \$159 per person and includes equipment, a local guide, and pick up in Roseau. No prior experience is required. Bring swimwear and closed footwear.

FORAGING
The foraging experience is US \$182 per group (two to four people) and must be booked in advance at <https://secretbay.dm>

Plymouth, the Caribbean Capital Closed to the Public

In 1997, a volcanic eruption buried two-thirds of Montserrat under a layer of ash and lava. **Gary Meenaghan** takes us into the “exclusion zones.”

Montserrat is a yin-yang of an island. The hospitable north features lush tropical foliage, black-sand beaches, and wonderful tranquility; the soulless south offers a modern-day Pompeii, complete with abandoned churches, a hotel-turned-horror-film-set, and a clock tower poking its head out of the ashen earth like a mole in spring. I'm here to experience both.

Located 30mi (48km) southwest of Antigua, in the Lesser Antilles, this tiny British Overseas Territory changed forever in the '90s, when the Soufrière Hills volcano awoke after centuries of dormancy and



Plymouth remains

engulfed almost two-thirds of the island in an avalanche of ash. Like something out of an apocalyptic novel, much of the south now falls within “exclusion zones” too dangerous to explore on foot.

A family legacy forged in lava

On June 25, 1997, American expat David Lea captured astonishing footage of the volcano's most violent eruption. Debris blasted 8mi (13km) into the air, and rocks the size of houses were thrown down the hillside. A superheated tsunami of ash and lava swamped the capital city of Plymouth within minutes, melting everything from asphalt to glass to roof tiles. David's footage is exhibited at the Montserrat Volcano Observatory.

Now, 22 years on, he runs a memorabilia-

rich coffee shop, while his son Sunny runs customized, guided tours. As expected on an islet measuring 40mi² (100km²), the Leas are well known, and Sunny is able to obtain the necessary permissions to take us into the exclusion zones. As we drive past various warning signs, the greenery fades to gray, and I feel excited and intrigued, but never unsafe, courtesy of Sunny's professionalism, prodigious knowledge, and passion for the island.

The ruins of a resort

Back in the 1980s, Montserrat was a hotspot for celebrities, and the lavish Montserrat Springs Hotel was its jewel. Located 2mi (3km) north of Plymouth, the resort offered its guests fashion shows, opulent brunches, and the chance to

mingle with the likes of The Rolling Stones and Sir Paul McCartney, both of whom recorded albums at the nearby AIR Studios.

But the music stopped in September, 1989 when Hurricane Hugo devastated the studio and severely damaged the hotel. Not long after itself known, as smoke and groans emanated from Soufrière Hills. Authorities evacuated 6,000 Monserrations from the southern region before it was eviscerated.

I'm standing by the hotel swimming pool, but I wouldn't recommend diving in unless you wish to disappear into a tangle of undergrowth. Much of the building hides under a thick carpet of volcanic debris, forcing me to stoop as I pass from room to room. A shower curtain hangs on its rail, the bathtub buried beneath my feet.

Much of the building hides under a thick carpet of volcanic debris, forcing me to stoop as I pass from room to room



Plymouth Courthouse Building



Plymouth remains

Gary Hooper / Dave Kohn

Administrative documents – including one for hurricane insurance – lie strewn across an office desk. Either staff expected the evacuation to be temporary, or they left in a panic.

The half-buried remains of Plymouth

Out in the garden, Sunny points towards the horizon. To the right lies the aquamarine ocean, to the left, the active volcano capped with an ominous, sulfurous cloud. Between them is the lifeless space where Plymouth used to be. Through binoculars, I can see what appears to be a wigwam, which Sunny tells me is in fact the steeple of a church. The way it protrudes from the sea of cinders makes me think of an ashen iceberg.

It's possible to visit Plymouth and the base of the volcano, which last erupted in 2013, but I'm traveling with my toddler daughter and Sunny is uneasy about getting too close in case we need to make a quick evacuation. We head back northwards, noting the change in landscape as the wasteland gradually cedes to vegetation clearly thriving in the mineral-rich soil. Abandoned homes and a house of

prayer that once acted as a refuge shelter are being slowly swallowed by jungle.

More than a disaster zone

Back on the bright side of the border, there's more to Montserrat than its notorious mountain. Intrepid travelers can experience the Caribbean as it used to be: free of cruise ships, mega resorts, and overpriced seafood. The local population fell from 13,000 in 1994 to as little as 1,200 three years later; now it's back up to a healthy 5,000.

Staring out at this undeveloped landscape, the luxuriant jungle and smoking volcano seem prehistoric – but instead of dinosaurs, goats graze, and chameleons hide in plain sight. Go in September and you might even spot turtles nesting at Lime Kiln Bay, a calm, black-sand cove.

On the way back to our homestay, Sunny stops the car by a freshwater spring marked Runaway Ghaut. A sign above the fount reads: "If you drink at this burn, to Montserrat you will return." My time on this enchanting isle is nearing its end. I put my mouth to the water and gulp down as much as I can.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

We paid US \$55 (EC \$150) each way for the 90-minute ferry from Heritage Quay in Antigua to Little Bay in Montserrat. Under-12s pay less, and free WiFi is available onboard.

SPECIFIC COSTS

Montserrat charges a departure tax of US \$9.25 (EC \$25), and Antigua US \$28 (EC\$75) for stays exceeding 24 hours on either island. Both customs offices only accept cash, but Montserrat will stamp your passport with a green shamrock – a hat-tip to the island's proud Irish roots.

TOURS

Only a handful of tour companies exist in Montserrat, and excursions start from around US \$50 (EC \$135). Visitors intending to enter Plymouth should ensure their guide can obtain the necessary permits, which cost US \$100 (EC \$270) per person. For a list of operators, go to www.VisitMontserrat.com.

Gary Hooper / John Seaton Corbett



UNFORGETTABLE

Surf Trippin' in Panama

On a particularly hot, humid, and surf-less January day on the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica, I get a text message from a friend promising a swell in the Caribbean.

A day later, I cross the Panamanian border to Changuinola, and catch a one-hour speedboat bound for Isla Colon in Bocas del Toro province.

After our first surf at a punchy wave called Paunch, we replenish at a signless roast chicken joint behind a chain-link fence. Ice-cold Balboa cervezas accompany the salty chicken and neon-orange habanero sauce.

The next day, the entire town of Bocas gathers in the plaza as the President of Panama arrives by helicopter. Running down in the nick of time, we are able to shake the hand of Ricardo Martinelli as he works the crowd.

Meanwhile, we've heard about a secret wave on Isla Bastimentos that you can only access by hiking to it.

After more than an hour of trudging through the jungle in sticky, sandal-snapping mud, we find a surf spot. We know it's the one, because the secret is out: six other surfers sit waiting for a wave. We paddle out and say hello. Within minutes, one of the other surfers shouts, "BULL SHARK!"

I nearly walk on water as I paddle to the shore, grab my broken Havaianas, and sprint back to the docks.

That night, we celebrate our misadventures at the local bars. Since I've already lost one pair of thongs and know of a swim-up cantina, I put a protective layer of duct-tape on my feet in lieu of shoes. Going shoeless pays off when we have to swim, fully clothed, to the last boat back to Isla Colon. *Audrey Hills*



Getty Images / Prince Capone

TRAVEL SMARTER

NEED TO KNOW

Ready to explore your boundaries and plan your own Caribbean adventure? First, check out our expert tips to help you travel smarter and more responsibly. What's the best way to get around? When's the best time to go? How can you help protect the local environment and support the local economy? Learn all that and more.

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Climate & Weather

Featuring mountains, deserts, and rainforests, the vast Caribbean region is more than just palm-fringed beaches.

From Jamaica's steamy mangrove swamps to the occasionally snowy top of Pico Duarte in the Dominican Republic, the Caribbean's weather is as diverse as its natural environment.

The entire region benefits from its proximity to the equator – from about 1,700mi (2,735km) in the northern Caribbean to around 621mi (1,000km) on Panama's Caribbean coast – leading to warm temperatures, usually between 25-33°C (77-90°F). That being said, there's marked variation in climate across the thousands of islands and the surrounding mainland nations.

A huge variety of wildlife inhabits the rainforests and reefs that abound throughout the Caribbean, which is considered a biodiversity hotspot. Finding activities that help you explore the environment is easy, and can provide valuable information regarding local conservation efforts and projects aimed at safeguarding the region's natural capital for future generations.

Many islands and mainland nations, such as Puerto Rico, in the eastern Caribbean, and Costa Rica and Belize, in Central America, feature warm, humid tropical weather. Meanwhile, the southern Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao tend to have a drier tropical climate, evident in their savannah-like landscapes and broadleaf forest. More temperate climates can be found on the elevated terrain of mountainous islands such as Dominican Republic, Haiti, or Jamaica.



Shutterstock / Peter K. King

The Caribbean experiences a period of dry, warm weather from December to April, and a wet season, that stretches from May to November

The Caribbean experiences a period of dry, warm weather from December to April, and a wet season, that stretches from May to November, with the highest risk of hurricanes and tropical storms occurring between June and November. Transport options, including flight or ferry schedules, can be affected by inclement weather, so it's important to stay updated and trust the decisions made by local operators.

Caution is always warranted when booking holidays during the wet season, but remember that the region is vast, and that a severe weather event occurring somewhere in the area is not always likely to affect your own destination. Responsible travelers should monitor reports from the Global Disaster and Coordination System (GDACS) and other official sources. But refrain from instantly cancelling your vacations when a hurricane hits the news, and instead contact your hotels and listen to local authorities and advice. *James Ellsmoor*

Responsible Travel in the Caribbean

A sustainability expert offers his tips for minimizing your impact, encouraging ecotourism, and helping the local economy.

From conservation success stories to unprecedented environmental degradation, tourism can be a double-edged sword, but more and more travelers are embracing responsible forms of travel. In the Caribbean, that often means looking beyond the typical cruises and all-inclusive resorts and exploring the region's unique cultures and incredible landscapes.

A global biodiversity hotspot, home to many endemic species, Caribbean ecosystems are admired by scientists, locals, and visitors alike. Sustainable tourism is a growing industry in the region, and it contributes to both economic development and successful conservation efforts.

When traveling throughout the Caribbean, you'll notice that the region is slowly emerging as a leader in sustainability, through efforts such as adopting renewable energy and banning single-use plastic. It offers countless opportunities to actively participate in responsible tourism and help drive the environmental movement.

Ecotourism vs overtourism

The Caribbean has been a victim of its own success in attracting sun, sand, and sea vacationers. In 2016, 46.7 million people experienced the islands' lush rainforests and coral reefs, but overtourism, a polluting cruise industry, and climate change have had a negative



When traveling throughout the Caribbean nations, you'll notice that the region is slowly emerging as a leader in sustainability

impact on the Caribbean's sustainability. From coral bleaching to plastic waste and large deposits of sargassum algae washing ashore, the Caribbean has been the first to witness the detrimental impact of climate change on the environment.

But the region is also taking action, taking the lead in environmental efforts such as cleaning up the oceans. Most of the islands have already taken the step to preserve their local environment by banning plastics. As Cheryl Carter, the UK Director of the Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc., explains: "Banning single-use plastics goes some way to ensuring the protection of our pristine beaches and crystal-clear waters that we are famous for. As a destination, however, we realize that our sustainability efforts cannot stop there, and we are proud to say we are embracing many conservation projects and methods across the island, from driving electric cars to biodynamic farming. We are excited for a more sustainable future."

Making responsible choices

Helping to preserve beautiful landscapes and rich biodiversity doesn't have to be left to scientists and politicians – as a traveler, you can contribute by making responsible choices.

Air travel has been put under the spotlight as a major source of carbon emissions, but there are solutions for the eco-conscious traveler. Buying carbon offsets for flights is one popular option, as it enables you to donate to various projects based in the region, ensuring your contribution stays local.

If you're looking for an experience that you won't find within the all-inclusive resorts that dot the beachfront, there are many alternative forms of retreat that blend tourism and sustainability. Evident in Guyana becoming the world's top ecotourism location, and Aruba pioneering agroforestry-based tourism, the region is adding an environmental flair to its breathtaking panoramas and rich cultural history.

As an ecotourist, the responsibility to protect the environment is shared between you and your host community. By choosing environmentally friendly resorts, joining local conservation efforts such as [The Sea Turtle Conservancy](#), and learning about the region's ecology, you not only expand your knowledge of sustainable practices, you help to drive conservation efforts.

Supporting the regional economy

As a result of the increasing popularity of ecotourism in the Caribbean, more and more eco-conscious travelers have visited the region. However, a 2017 report by the World Travel & Tourism Council notes that despite the region's popularity, misconceptions regarding the severity and location of storms in the Caribbean have discouraged tourists from traveling to the area. The destruction caused by Hurricane Dorian and Tropical Storm Humberto in 2019 serves as a stark

reminder of the problems facing the various nations that make up the region, but these events are rare and should not put off potential visitors.

Sensational headlines tend to be rife on those occasions that severe weather does occur, so ensure that any information you heed comes from local sources that are aware of the current conditions at your destination. Tourism makes a vital contribution to the region's economy, so it's important to make informed decisions, as your choice to cancel does not just affect you, but can have serious local repercussions and cause further economic damage.

The tourism industry and the environmental sector haven't always been on the same page, but they are intertwined. Ecotourism protects both the local environment and the economy, by ensuring that future generations can enjoy the same natural beauty that has long defined the Caribbean. Responsible tourists are driving the sustainable development of the region, one vacation at a time. *James Ellsmoor*

As an ecotourist, the responsibility to protect the environment is shared between you and your host community



Sea Turtle Conservation Tips

Wanting to help these amazing creatures thrive is commendable – but it's important to go about it the right way.

Around the Caribbean, many beachfront hotels offer guests the opportunity to participate in sea turtle conservation programs. While this sounds like a helpful activity, it can be misleading.

It's important to ensure the program is properly managed and not harmful to the turtles. Here's how to find sea turtle-friendly hotels and conservation experiences.

Conscientious hatchling releases

Many hotels operate turtle hatcheries and allow visitors to participate in the release of hatchlings. But hatcheries are controversial and strongly discouraged, except as a last resort to protect nests from erosion, predation, or poaching by humans. Resorts that allow visitors to release hatchlings often do so in ways that are detrimental. When hatchlings emerge naturally from a nest, they almost always do so at night, and for good reason – they are less visible to predators. Unfortunately, many turtle releases for visitors occur in daytime. Opt for a night-time, guided turtle walk instead, or insist that hatchlings are released at night and in large groups so they stand a better chance of survival.

Turtle-friendly hotel lighting

It was once easy for hatchlings to find the ocean, because the brightest horizon on a natural beach is in the direction of the water. Now, many coasts are lined with



beachfront properties that emit bright, disorienting lights. Turtle-friendly lighting directs light down to the ground, shields the light source from being visible from the beach, and is outfitted with a red or amber LED light bulb.

Removing beach furniture

Furniture left on the beach overnight can pose a great danger for nesting sea turtles that become entangled, or are prevented from reaching a suitable habitat. Hotels truly committed to protecting nesting sites will remove beach furniture at night, or at least stack it out of the way.

Straws or other single-use plastics

About 80% of the plastic debris in the ocean comes from land. Oceanfront properties have to be especially mindful of their plastic use because items can easily fly away from the beach and end up in the stomachs of sea turtles. Hotels should provide paper straws, or offer plastic only on request. *Lexie Beach*

Hotels truly committed to protecting nesting sites will remove beach furniture at night, or at least stack it out of the way

Getting Around

With large expanses of water separating many Caribbean destinations, getting around can be a challenge.

While all-inclusive package holidays are ubiquitous in the Caribbean, travelers who want to explore their own way will get to experience the region from a totally different perspective. Backpackers are still infrequent, but for the adventurous traveler with an open mind, it can be a highly rewarding opportunity.

Flights

Many flights to the region transit through Miami/Fort Lauderdale or Panama, but there are direct flights from various US, Canadian, and European cities to some islands. Traveling between islands can be surprisingly difficult and expensive, meaning any multi-island trip requires advance planning. The regional carrier LIAT links many destinations in the Eastern Caribbean, but you'll often hear the joke that the acronym stands for "Leave Island Any Time", serving as a playful warning to travelers.



Island transport

Transport within the islands tends to be relatively easy, but can sometimes be expensive. Taxis are usually a safe option but require the same common sense that you would employ at home. Local buses on many islands provide an affordable alternative, but you may have to ask around to work out the schedules and routes. In Jamaica, the Knutsford Express provides a reliable, comfortable option with air conditioning and Wi-Fi, and serves most major towns on the island.

Ferries

Despite its beautiful waters and the short distances between islands, the Caribbean lacks an extensive ferry network. Fort Lauderdale, Florida to Freeport, Grand Bahama is the only regular ferry link between the region and the United States, and services departing from South or Central America are available from only a handful of ports to nearby islands.

Domestic ferry links are common within countries to their smaller islands, such as from Trinidad to Tobago, Grenada to Carriacou, St. Vincent to the Grenadines, and within the Bahamas archipelago. One of the best options for an international island trip is with the L'Express des Îles ferries running frequently to connect the islands of Dominica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and St. Lucia. *James Ellsmoor*

Despite its beautiful waters and the short distances between islands, the Caribbean lacks an extensive ferry network

Festival Calendar

Honoring traditions both local and those brought here from around the world, Caribbean festivals are a memorable way to discover the region's food, music, and diverse culture.

Carnival

Originally a pre-Lenten celebration, this boisterous street parade takes place at other times of the year on some islands. Events typically feature elaborate costumes and floats. The biggest, oldest, and most famous Carnival in the Caribbean is held in the two days before Ash Wednesday in Port of Spain, Trinidad.

March

Holi

Celebrating the first day of spring, this vibrant Hindu festival is observed by the whole community in Trinidad and Tobago. The festival's highlight involves celebrants – clad in white for maximum effect – throwing brightly colored powder and liquid on each other.

Trinidad and Tobago (also other countries with large East Indian populations)

This vibrant Hindu festival is observed by the whole community in Trinidad and Tobago



Barbados Crop Over festival

Late April

National Family Island Regatta

This annual event began in 1954 with the intention of keeping Bahamian boat building and sailing traditions alive. Boats must be designed, built, owned, and sailed by Bahamians.

Great Exuma, The Bahamas

island would hold a festival entirely dedicated to this fruit. The four-day event features culinary competitions, cooking classes, and demonstrations.

Island-wide

May

Maypole Festival

A traditionally English event with a very Caribbean spin, this month-long festival consists of rotating neighborhood block parties, Maypole dances, beauty pageants, and street parades.

Bluefields, Nicaragua

July/August

Crop Over

Founded in the 1780s, this festival traditionally marked the end of the sugar harvest. It's now a massive, five-week event that includes folk concerts, carnival shows, masquerade parades, flower festivals, and all kinds of other live entertainment.

Bridgetown, Barbados

Early July

Nevis Mango & Food Festival

More than 40 varieties of mango are grown on Nevis, so it makes sense the

Early August

Bermuda Cup Match

The entire island shuts down for this two-day event, which is centered around

The entire island shuts down for this two-day event, which is centered around a cricket match, but also features parades, dancing, and gambling

a cricket match, but also features parades, dancing, and gambling (in the form of the dice game Crown and Anchor).

Alternates every year between St. George's and Somerset parishes

October

Feria de Río Tigre

Members of the Guna tribe, one of the last indigenous tribes of the Caribbean, gather from around the Guna Yala archipelago for a four-day craft fair, feasts, games, and traditional dancing.

Isla Tigre, Guna Yala, Panama

October/November

Divali

The Hindu festival of lights, dedicated to the goddess Lakshmi, is by far the most prominent of the East Indian celebrations on Trinidad and Tobago – in fact, it's a national holiday, observed by people of all denominations. *Deyas* (clay lamps) are lit by the millions, and free public performances of music, theater, and dance are held around the country.

Trinidad and Tobago (also other countries with large East Indian populations)

Last weekend of November

Turks and Caicos Conch Festival

The islands celebrate their cult-like regard for this giant mollusc with a conch fritter-eating contest, a conch-knocking contest, a conch-peeling competition, and a conch-blowing tournament.

Providenciales

Dec 26 and Jan 1

Junkanoo

According to some sources, this iconic Bahamian masquerade began in the 18th century as a holiday granted to slaves by their owners. A celebration of Bahamian culture, with elements of social commentary, it features imaginatively costumed dancers accompanied by goatskin drums, whistles, bugles, and cowbells.

The Bahamas



Divali

Getty Images/Julius S



Taxi in Havana

TRAVEL SMARTER

TRAVEL SAFETY

Idyllic and beautiful though it may be, the Caribbean region poses its share of risks for travelers, from crime and corruption to natural hazards. Nomad **Joanna Tovia** shares her commonsense tips to keep you safe and informed, so you can bravely explore.

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Passports, Visas & Currency

So you've planned your trip, but have you got your visa? It's arguably the most important thing to do before you go. Here are a few tips to make the visa application process easy.

Before you go

Travelers from many countries can visit the Caribbean without a visa, but agreements between countries vary. Trinidad and Tobago, for example, has agreements in place for visa-free travel for citizens of many countries around the world – but not all. While residents of the European Union, the US, UK, and many other countries can travel without a visa, Australians and New Zealanders need to secure a visa on arrival, while travelers from other countries need to arrange one before they leave home.

Even if you're only visiting an island for a day trip, it's still a good idea to have a visa pre-arranged for all destinations that require them. Fingers crossed this doesn't happen to you, but a serious health issue requiring urgent medical attention or an issue with your transportation may mean you need to spend more time in a place than you anticipated. Already having a visa can make life easier during an already stressful time.

If you're traveling to the Caribbean via the USA, from a country that qualifies for an ESTA visa waiver (UK, Australia, and New Zealand among them), keep in mind that the time you spend in the Caribbean may count towards the 90 days you're allowed to spend in the US. The Bahamas is one such example.



Passport protection

If you're staying in accommodation on an island, avoid carrying your passport around with you. Lock it in the hotel safe if possible – leaving it on the beach while you take a dip creates an easy opportunity for thieves. It's also wise to leave a copy of your passport back at the hotel (ideally in the lining or locked, zippered section of your suitcase), and email an additional copy to someone you trust before you leave home.

If you do have to carry your passport, conceal it under your clothes in a waterproof cover. Sweat, humidity, and water can damage the pages to the point your passport no longer passes muster.

Currency

Visa, Amex, and MasterCard are accepted in well-visited areas, and US dollars are accepted throughout the Caribbean, but if you venture beyond the major tourist areas, local currency is handy to have. Avoid keeping all your cash together, and whatever you do, don't advertise that you have it by opening your wallet, purse, or money pouch in a crowd.

Travelers from beyond the US should change some money into US dollars before they leave home, as exchanging some currencies for local or US dollars won't be possible once you're in the Caribbean.

Even if you're only visiting an island for a day trip, it's still a good idea to have a visa pre-arranged for all destinations that require them

10 Travel Safety Tips

From hurricanes and tropical storms to road safety, LGBTQ+ travel, and adventure activities, here are some key issues to keep in mind.

Keeping money and valuables safe

You can withdraw local currency from ATMs, but take care to cover your PIN. There have been reports of foreign visitors being robbed after withdrawing money. A travel companion who can act as a look-out while you're focused on the ATM is advisable.

If you've hired a car, avoid locking valuables such as cameras and mobile devices inside. Car break-ins are common and locals can often identify hire cars by their license plates, alerting them to a potential goldmine inside. Conceal anything you don't want stolen in the glovebox or under a seat.

LGBTQ+ travel

Even where same-sex relationships are legal, attitudes are still on the conservative side in some Caribbean countries.

Homosexual relations are illegal in these eastern Caribbean countries and territories (sometimes for males only): Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Holding hands or kissing a same-sex partner in public may attract negative attention. Criminal prosecutions of travelers are rare, but prison sentences range from five years to life. And the existence of gross indecency laws in these countries does nothing to curtail



the local stigma around homosexuality. As a result, few locals feel safe revealing their sexual orientation.

More welcoming are LGBTQ+-friendly islands such as Puerto Rico, St. Barts, St. Martin, and St. Croix.

While resorts throughout the Caribbean are typically accepting of all sexual orientations, if you're traveling beyond such accommodation on the more conservative islands, it may pay to be discreet.

Natural disasters

Hurricanes: These are an unfortunate reality in the region, particularly between June and November.

Hurricane Dorian, which struck in September 2019, was the most intense tropical cyclone on record to strike The Bahamas, and the worst natural disaster the country has endured. Grand Bahama and Abacos bore the brunt of the Category 5 hurricane, but many of the 700 islands in The Bahamas escaped unscathed, and tourism is already bouncing back.

Hurricane Dorian, which struck in September 2019, was the most intense tropical cyclone on record to strike The Bahamas

Two years earlier, two Category 5 hurricanes swept through the eastern Caribbean, wreaking havoc on Barbuda, Dominica, Puerto Rico, and many other Caribbean islands.

Mudslides, flooding, high seas, and tsunamis can accompany severe tropical storms, which can change direction with little warning. Familiarize yourself with your accommodation's evacuation plan, even when the skies are clear, and monitor media reports during your travels.

If a hurricane is approaching, find out early if and where evacuation shelters are being set up. Be aware that flights may be suspended until winds subside enough for safe takeoffs. If airports and ferry ports sustain damage, your "getaway" may be longer than you anticipated.

Rising sea levels and higher temperatures resulting from climate change mean hurricanes in the Caribbean are becoming more intense. That doesn't mean you should avoid the area, but traveling during peak hurricane season is not advised. The risk of hurricanes is lowest between December and April, with the added benefit of lower rainfall and less humid weather.

Some islands are more susceptible to hurricanes than others. Aruba, Barbados, Curaçao, and Grenada lie just south of the hurricane belt and rarely get hit head-on. Rarely doesn't mean never, of course, so if you do get caught in a hurricane or severe storm, stay inside, away from windows and doors, to protect yourself from flying debris.

The Global Disaster and Coordination System (GDACS) is the travel companion you need in case of a hurricane or earthquake. The site provides satellite imagery, advisory information, and alerts.

Earthquakes: The Caribbean is an active seismic zone but, although tremors are common, earthquakes rarely exceed a magnitude of 3.0. Knowing this should provide some peace of mind if the earth begins to shudder beneath you.

Mudslides, flooding, high seas, and tsunamis can accompany severe tropical storms

However, in 2010 a 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti, causing widespread devastation. And a recent earthquake (October 2019) measuring an unusual 5.0 on the Richter scale affected the British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, Anguilla, and several other islands. But the chances of your holiday destination being affected are slim, when you consider the number of harmless earthquakes occurring throughout the Caribbean on any given day. Take a look at Earthquake Track for a glimpse into the past 24 hours.

Transport safety

Driving: The easygoing island vibe is one reason travelers love coming to the Caribbean, but this laidback attitude comes with a few dangers, especially on the roads. Even if there are speed limits, they may not be enforced, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs is commonplace, and road rules such as signaling to turn or change lanes are often disregarded.

If you're venturing out of town, road conditions may not be what you're used to (think potholes, sketchy road markings, and unsealed stretches) and can be subject to flooding during tropical downpours.

If you're visiting more than one island, keep in mind that on some driving is on the left and on others driving is on the →



right – usually as a legacy of its colonial history. In Barbados and Jamaica, for example, you'll be driving on the left, but on the right in Honduras and Puerto Rico.

Complicating matters is the fact that the steering wheel is usually on the left regardless of which side of the road you're required to drive on, simply because cars are typically imported from the US.

Public transport: Getting around using public transport may seem wiser than driving, but this option also has risks worth knowing about. Buses may be poorly maintained, drivers may have varying levels of training, and buses are subject to the same hazards on the roads as cars and taxis.

Don't be surprised if your bus or taxi driver navigates the roads with cell phone in hand – new legislation is making this illegal on some islands, but laws may not be strictly enforced.

Reckless driving and a lack of sidewalks mean pedestrian accidents are common, so take care walking along roadsides and crossing the road, especially if you're used to cars driving on the opposite side. Catch registered or clearly marked taxis if you can, rather than ridesharing in private vehicles or accepting a ride from someone you just met (your hotel should be able to book a taxi for you or advise on



Don't be surprised if your bus or taxi driver navigates the roads with cell phone in hand – new legislation is making this illegal on some islands, but laws may not be strictly enforced

how to identify reputable taxis).

Before you set off, be sure to agree on a price with the taxi driver, check accepted payment methods, and test that the seatbelts work. If you're hiring a scooter or bicycle to get around, be sure to wear a helmet.

Adventure safety

Parasailing, scuba diving, horse riding on the beach – if all goes well, vacationing in the Caribbean can be non-stop fun. Being smart about it can minimize the chance of accidents, keeping in mind that services may not be as organized or efficient as you'd expect back home.

The first step is to check whether the activities you have in mind are covered under your travel insurance policy, and what the conditions of that cover might be.

Next, check on the operator's safety and communications equipment before booking, and find out if the company is registered. Boating and water sports operators are poorly regulated on many of the islands, and if they aren't operating legally, it could affect your cover.

It's tempting to throw caution to the wind when you're in vacation mode, but using all available safety equipment, such as life jackets, just makes good sense (and if required by law, must be used). Use another operator if safety equipment isn't provided, and ask for extra training on watercraft if you're unsure how to safely operate it.

Novice horseback riders (or those who haven't ridden for a while) should also take care – you may like the idea of galloping along the beach, hair blowing in the wind, but it's far wiser to don a helmet and slow down. Falling off a horse can quickly put an end to your vacation fun.

Your hotel or resort may help you book a tour or activity, but they don't share liability with the operator if an accident occurs. The operators are independent and may not have liability insurance, so you may want to try to find a reputable one who does before signing up.

Travel Cons to Avoid

Even in paradise, criminals are adept at coming up with novel ways to fleece the unsuspecting visitor. Here are 10 common scams to watch out for:

Police scams: imposters posing as police officers, security, or military personnel that signal cars to pull over and ask drivers for a "donation". A scruffy uniform is a dead giveaway, but take care, because they may be armed. Request identification, and if they try to give you a fine and expect you to pay it on the spot, ask for a ticket instead.

Hidden fees: "all-inclusive" tours that fail to mention all the extras you'll have to pay for on the day. Entry fees into attractions, equipment hire, lunch, or drinks may not be included, so bring some local currency or US dollars just in case. Better yet, confirm exactly what's covered at the time of booking.

No free rides: an apparently friendly offer to give you a ride in a moped or canoe to a local attraction for a fee can turn sour when it comes to the return journey. Despite agreeing to the contrary, your host is likely to insist you only paid to get there – not back – and demand extra payment.

Lottery scam: you may not even have to leave home for this one. The Jamaican lottery scam brings at least \$100 million into Jamaica each year when unsuspecting people receive a phone call informing them they've won the lottery. All they need to do is send money to cover the taxes and fees first. Sounds legit, right?

Timeshares: promises of riches and free holidays that are in fact expensive investments that deliver little in returns.

Clever sales people can push you into signing up, but if you change your mind, be sure to back out within five days. It can be time-consuming and expensive to cancel after that.

Overcharging taxi drivers: agree on a price for the trip before you get in.

Phony friends: relationships that are more about money than love. Locals can seem genuine in forming a relationship, but it soon becomes obvious that their affections come at a price when money or gifts are requested.

Fake charities: scammers who pretend they are raising money for a good cause – hurricane recovery/relief, for example. Check that crowdfunding campaigns and charities are the real deal before parting with your cash. Facebook profiles have also been impersonated and friends contacted for donations.

Bogus package deals: too-good-to-be-true vacation packages that evaporate after you've paid for them. If the hotel isn't revealed before booking, avoid it. If an association with a resort group is mentioned, make a phone call to check on the legitimacy of partnerships.

Change rip-offs: paying for meals or goods in US dollars and getting local currency as change presents a prime opportunity for locals to rip off travelers – mental currency conversions are a challenge for most people on vacation, so they may not realize they've been given less change than they deserve.



Common Scams in The Bahamas

Unregulated jet ski hire operators in The Bahamas are known to overcharge or call you back before your time is complete, and may not follow proper safety procedures. Be sure to rent from a reputable operator recommended by your hotel or the tourist office.

Vendors at marketplaces where prices are negotiated, such as Nassau's Straw Market, sometimes hike their prices when dealing with visitors. Use your bargaining skills – a general rule of thumb is to slash the price in half to start your negotiations.

Getting your hair braided (aka cornrows) is a popular way to appreciate Afro-Caribbean culture. Unfortunately, visitors are sometimes tricked into paying exorbitant prices. A fee will be set at the beginning, then when the hairstyle is done, the visitor is told the fee must be drastically increased because of the time taken or the length of your hair. Negotiate a price upfront and verify time and hair length is being considered.

Diedre McLeod

Law & Crime

The Caribbean may have a laid-back reputation, but it's not wise to let your guard down completely. Here's what you can do to help avoid trouble.

Corruption

It's no secret that corruption is rife on many Caribbean islands. Open a newspaper and you're likely to read about a case of government or police corruption serious enough to make headlines. That's not to say efforts aren't being made to counter corruption, but deeply entrenched practices aren't easy to stamp out.

Travelers are unlikely to be impacted, but rumors of police bribery are undoubtedly founded in fact, and can leave travelers in trouble feeling powerless.

In the Dominican Republic, for example, finding yourself involved in a no-fault car accident that results in serious injury or death will land you in custody for at least two days. Frustratingly, two days can stretch into weeks or months. The Dominican Republic has one of the worst rates of auto fatalities in the world, and about 80% of those being held in prisons as a result have yet to be sentenced.

Corruption can also impact travelers when drug dealers and police work together to trap them into paying bribes. Travelers who accept an offer to buy drugs may find themselves having to pay a substantial sum of money to the police officer, who appears out of nowhere to arrest them after making the transaction.

Avoid buying or using any illegal substances, and if you do get into strife, contact your embassy or consulate for assistance.



Crime

Caribbean islands have varying crime levels, with murder rates some of the highest in the world. Most violent crimes are associated with gang warfare and drugs, but travelers are definite targets when it comes to theft, scams, and assault.

Drink spiking

By all means, kick back with a drink or two at a beach bar or nightclub, but keep an eye (or hand) on your drink at all times. If you need to use the restroom or want to hit the dance floor sans beverage, hand it to someone you know and trust, rather than leaving it on the bar.

Drink spiking with "date-rape" drugs such as GHB and Rohypnol is a known problem on many of the islands – Jamaica, Honduras, and The Bahamas among them. After losing consciousness, victims are robbed, assaulted, and then abandoned, leaving them vulnerable to

By all means, kick back with a drink or two at a beach bar or nightclub, but keep an eye (or hand) on your drink at all times



further violations. Watch drinks being poured, refuse drinks from strangers, and mind your alcohol intake.

Harassment

Impoverished islanders who rely solely on holidaymakers to earn money can resort to aggressive tactics to make a sale. An assertive "no" is necessary to ward off pushy vendors.

Avoid eye contact and keep walking when vendors or taxi drivers call out to you as you're walking past. If you're pursued, be firm but polite in your refusal and keep walking.

Child beggars can pull at your heart strings, but their requests for money can border on harassment, and giving them money may encourage them to continue begging instead of going to school.

Young women are likely to encounter cat calls and sexual advances from local men. Persuasive and even forceful pick-up strategies are used, particularly in and

around bars at night, so try to avoid going solo, and dress fairly modestly.

Both men and women may be approached by prostitutes hustling for paid sex. Some travelers are attracted to the Caribbean because of its sex tourism industry, but all visitors are potential clients in the minds of local sex workers as a result. A firm "no" will be called for if this isn't for you.

Those who do engage in sexual encounters should take precautions and be aware of the risks – the Caribbean is second only to Africa in the prevalence of HIV.

Theft

Cash, mobile devices, cameras, passports, and jewelry are all hot commodities in the Caribbean, with theft the most likely crime to affect travelers. Resorts often have their own security officers patrolling the entrance and grounds as a result, but remember to



BANNED ACTIVITIES

CAMOUFLAGE
Military fatigues may be a fashion statement or serve as everyday wear where you're from, but on several Caribbean islands they are illegal. Barbados, Jamaica, Grenada, Dominica, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent have a zero-tolerance attitude to camouflage being worn by anyone who isn't in the military, whether it's a hat, bag, wallet, or clothing.

DRUGS
Drugs are illegal (and dangerously potent) in the Caribbean, so it is advisable to steer well clear. Don't be surprised if you're offered "ganja" (cannabis) by a local during your stay. Despite its obvious influence on Rastafarian culture in Jamaica and beyond, the drug is illegal. If you're caught with marijuana, heroin, cocaine, or any other illegal drug, arrest and imprisonment is likely. Prison conditions are crowded and unpleasant and the justice system questionable. Consider yourself forewarned.



officer, for example).

If you hire a car, keep the windows and doors locked. Carjackings happen and thieves have been known to stop cars by throwing rocks at them, before robbing drivers at gunpoint.

Violent crime and sexual assault

The Bahamas has one of the highest rates of rape in the world, with attacks occurring at all times of day. Assaults are concentrated near hotels, casinos, and nightclubs, as well as beaches after dark. Excess alcohol consumption increases the risk of attack, but daytime joggers and young girls have also been targeted.

Take the same care no matter which island you're visiting – sexual assaults can and do occur throughout the Caribbean.

Ask front desk staff about no-go areas if you want to go out exploring. Jamaica declared a state of emergency in parts of Montego Bay and Negril this year, imposing curfews and dramatically increasing police presence to reduce escalating murder rates. Unwittingly wandering into these areas can be disastrous.

In Trinidad and Tobago, violent crime is on the rise, with travelers advised to avoid downtown Port of Spain at night – travelers have become victims of robberies and assaults at gunpoint there.

Muggings are a potential problem throughout the Caribbean. Robberies can quickly turn violent if travelers resist handing over cash or valuables – losing them is better than being left with the trauma and potential injury that come with an assault.

Crowd safety

Festivals, street celebrations, holidays, and peak times such as Spring Break draw the crowds, but an increase in visitor numbers inevitably leads to a spike in petty theft. Leave valuables in your hotel room safe, and take extra care. Nothing kills the festive mood like becoming a victim of theft.



Safety Tips for Solo Women Travelers in Jamaica

Dress like a local – no "Jamaica" branded t-shirts and clothing, and no fanny packs. They're one of the quickest ways to signal you're a visitor and make you a target for theft.

Limit all public displays of affection, regardless of your sexual orientation. Jamaica is a conservative place when it comes to this.

Don't give detailed information about your itinerary or departure date. Many crimes against visitors occur the night before they leave the island. Give the wrong dates if you feel pressured for information.

Hire drivers from reputable tour companies or with chartered (registered) taxis. Avoid taking "route-taxis" that are filled with only male passengers.

To meet local women, consider the Jamaica Tourist Board's "Meet the People" program where foreigners are matched with Jamaicans for a more intimate look at Jamaican life.

Diedre McLeod

Health & Hygiene

Mosquito-borne diseases, food safety, and water contamination are some of the risks to be aware of.

Water quality

Drinking-water quality varies throughout the Caribbean. If water quality is in question, play it safe by drinking bottled water (making sure seals are intact), and avoid ice cubes in drinks. Or to be more environmentally friendly, treat or boil water or use water bottles with filters that eliminate harmful bacteria.

Water quality is likely to be affected if a hurricane or serious tropical storm has recently passed through. Swimming off the coast can also be hazardous after extended heavy rain and storms, which can cause contaminants to wash into the ocean. Check with your hotel before taking a dip.

Pollution

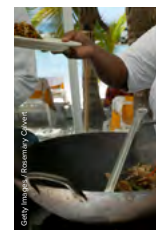
Water and air pollution are unlikely to be apparent to travelers enjoying the crystal-clear waters and blue skies of the Caribbean. Action is being taken to counter the mountains of plastic waste that end up in the region's oceans, with bans or near-bans on single-use plastic bags and Styrofoam products. Supporting businesses that are making an effort to curb emissions and waste is one way to protect the local environment.

Food safety

Hygiene practices at major resorts are generally of a high standard, minimizing the chance you'll suffer the dreaded diarrhea that can come with international travel. Dysentery and hepatitis, caused by consuming contaminated food and water, are also unlikely if you're eating primarily at resorts.

But you'll be missing out on a lot of delicious food and culture if you don't eat

There are countless cases of food poisoning on the islands each year, often caused by improper handling of seafood



at local restaurants. They're usually fine, too, but if there are signs it isn't clean, avoid it. There are countless cases of food poisoning on the islands each year, often caused by improper handling of seafood.

Checking with your accommodation before eating out is a smart move. If you're dining out on an island where you're concerned about water quality, avoid unpeeled fresh fruits and uncooked vegetables.

Diseases and vaccinations

The World Health Organization (WHO) has given most countries in the Caribbean a Category 1 classification when it comes to the Zika virus – it is prevalent. Zika is particularly dangerous for pregnant women because of the deformities it can cause fetuses in-utero. The virus spreads primarily via mosquito bites, but can also be sexually transmitted.

Pregnant women should avoid the Caribbean entirely to avoid exposure to Zika. Travelers should apply mosquito repellent throughout their trip to protect themselves from not only Zika, but also malaria, Dengue fever, Chikungunya virus, Chagas' disease and leishmaniasis – and harmless but itchy bites.

Hepatitis A is a viral infection of the liver contracted by consuming contaminated water, food, or ice, and occurs throughout the islands of the Caribbean. Fortunately, the vaccine for Hepatitis A is safe and effective.

HIV/AIDS is prevalent in the Caribbean, particularly The Bahamas, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Dominican Republic. Heterosexual sex, often involving sex workers, is the most common way HIV is spread in most countries, but in Puerto Rico and Bermuda, HIV infections almost always arise from intravenous drug use.

Practicing safe sex and avoiding drug injection is, of course, the way to protect yourself. Victims of violent crimes, especially rape, should seek immediate medical assistance.

Essential Travel Insurance Tips

The Caribbean islands aren't always paradise. That's why there's travel insurance. Here are a few situations that you could encounter, and tips on how you can get the most out of your coverage.

Severe weather

Hurricanes and tropical storms are among the biggest threats of your trip turning upside down. If your flight has been canceled or your hotel is unable to accept visitors, you may qualify for trip cancellation or interruption benefits, depending on your country of residence. Timing is key here: You need to have bought your plan before the storm was announced. You also won't be eligible for coverage if you cancel because of a few knocked-down trees or the forecast is cloudy and gray.



Street crime

Street crime and petty theft, such as pickpocketing and mugging, are unfortunate realities in the Caribbean. Should that happen to you, get to safety first and go to the local authorities to report the incident (don't forget to get a copy of the report). World Nomads' 24/7 Emergency Assistance team can give you a hand with whatever you need in a crisis, such as helping to locate health care facilities or consular services and contacting family members.

If your personal belongings get swiped under your supervision, besides reporting the incident, you'll also need the original receipts for the items. Your policy may have per-item and maximum limits and exclude coverage of high-value items or cash.

Adventure

The Caribbean often feels like a non-stop adventure, from snorkeling in crystal-clear water and trekking amid cloud forests to swimming under cascading waterfalls.

Whatever the activity, it's important to choose the right level of coverage. Read the policy wording, browse the World Nomads' Help Center, or contact our customer service team to see if what you're planning to do is covered under your plan. You may have to pay an additional premium for an adventure sports upgrade or purchase the Explorer plan instead of a Standard.

Certain adventures may also have special requirements which, if you don't comply, could affect your coverage. These could be getting certification for your activity or booking the excursion with a qualified, licensed operator. It could also be as simple as abiding by safety practices, whether or not they're required by local law.

It's never a good idea to guzzle multiple frozen daiquiris before scuba diving, or go hiking solo when you're just a beginner and have a poor sense of direction. Your coverage is contingent upon your

Whatever activity you plan to do, it's important to choose the right level of coverage

Get our smart, flexible Travel Insurance here



responsible behavior. So, best to refrain from anything that would be likely to get you in trouble. Also, be sure to check your policy for exclusions, such as unguided dives or search-and-rescue missions.

Medical emergencies

Surfing accidents, sunburn and dehydration, food poisoning, or – heaven forbid – an act of violence. Major and minor occurrences can happen in the Caribbean, and believe us, they do...no matter how careful or prepared you think you are.

The first thing to remember is to contact the 24/7 Emergency Assistance team, who will need to approve your surgical procedures, medical treatment, or evacuation before you go forward with them. Otherwise your coverage may be reduced or invalidated.

Remember: deductibles may apply; any emergencies due to pre-existing conditions aren't included unless specified in your policy; and your plan only covers emergencies, not routine or preventative care, such as eyeglass prescriptions.

All of the information we provide about travel insurance is a brief summary only. It does not include all terms, conditions, limitations, exclusions and termination provisions of the travel insurance plans described. Coverage may not be available for residents of all countries, states or provinces. Please carefully read your policy wording for a full description of coverage.

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Meet Our Contributors

Our writers are world travelers bound by the desire to truly understand the countries they visit. Some are Caribbean locals, some are regional experts, some are seekers of adventure – but all are nomads at heart.



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Born and raised in Jamaica, Diedre is on a mission to bring the world closer to Caribbean women via her travel adventures.



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Trene is a food and travel writer based in Los Angeles. A former on-camera entertainment reporter, she now creates digital food and travel content.



Joanna Tovia
AUSTRALIA

Joanna is a freelance travel writer and photographer. When not exploring far-flung lands, she's writing for companies doing good in the world.



Polly Thomas
UNITED KINGDOM

Freelance editor, travel writer, and author of multiple guidebooks, Polly has been writing about the Caribbean since the 90s.



Ashley Winchester
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Ashley is a writer and editor whose personal motto is "never stop learning". Her work has appeared in *The New York Times* and *BBC Travel*, among others.



Talia Wooldridge
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Talia is a freelance writer and ethnomusicologist passionate about sustainable music travel, hiking, and cycling adventures.



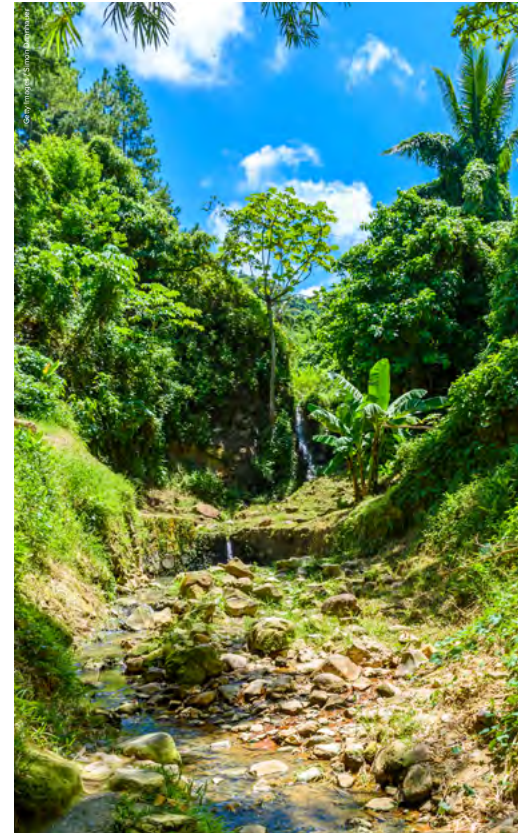
Kaila Yu
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Kaila is a travel and food writer based in Los Angeles. She is the co-author of the best-selling book *30-Day Travel Challenge*.



Sascha Zuger
UNITED STATES

Sascha is a travel writer, novelist, and PADI Divemaster. After exploring more than 50 countries, she's focusing on writing about her adventures.



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