Caribbean Signature

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Seven Great Reasons to visit Antigua and Barbuda

by Mark Stevens

You're lounging on Antigua's Great Bird Island, on an alabaster beach you share with no one. The surf whispers sweet nothings to the sand, the excursion boat that's deposited you here the only sign of humanity.

Paradise.

You're lounging on one of a necklace of islands encircling the nation of Antigua and Barbuda, emerald oases that surround a royal ransom in its own right.

You've just discovered a great reason to visit a Caribbean gem.

And you've only just begun.

LIFE IS A BEACH

Truth be known, narrowing your choices to seven will be nigh impossible.

Just counting beaches, you're up to nearly four hundred great reasons.

Chill in the shade of palms in a cove guarded by the ruins of a colonial fort at Deep Bay.

Head south to Turner's; perfect lunches and Wadadli Beers at seaside tables bordered by white picket fences.

Hang with locals at Falmouth's Pigeon Point – watch a regular procession of mega yachts gliding past a sun-dappled beach.

Get active: go horseback riding at Fort St. James Beach, paddleboard at Dickenson, kite-board at Jabberwock. Or go for solitude: Green Island or Ffrey's.

UNDER THE SEA

But maybe you're not content to merely gaze out to sea. Maybe you want to up the adrenaline quotient – go exploring under the sea.

Book an excursion to a windswept east coast sandbar and frolic beneath the waves with stingrays, graceful underwater denizens of Stingray City.

Ride a unique high-speed glass bottom boat with Sea Escape Tours, observing the reefs in comfort, or book an eco tour that combines snorkeling and sea kayaking. Don a mask and check out the reef at Green Island, near Hell's Gate Island, in Carlisle Bay or explore the wreck of a steamer in Deep Bay.

Want to get even more up-close and personal? Get PADI – certified. Then book a dive boat to one of four island dive locations.

ISLAND GETAWAY(S)

Climb the ridges of Great Bird Island, taking in panoramic views or searching for the endangered Antiguan Racer snake. Scramble over Hell's Gate Island's surreal landforms. Discover the sun, sea and sand at Green Island. Sail past the unassuming little slabs of rock and cactus that lent their name to Five Islands Bay, or spend the night in luxury at Jumby Bay Resort – one of Antigua's most elegant properties – on Long Island.

Or venture even further afield.

For the ultimate in seclusion,



Antigua boasts a year's worth of beaches, from secluded stretches of sand to this one at Carlisle Bay Resort.

consider Barbuda, with a pink sand beach that's nigh on ten miles long, a bastion of solitude once loved by the late Princess Diana.

Truth is, from Rabbit Island to Rendondo, Antigua boasts roughly forty out islands that are yours to explore.

Just want an island getaway? The world's at your doorstep.

Want an island getaway from an island getaway?

Welcome to Antigua and Barbuda. And company.

SAILING INTO THE SUNSET

Visiting Antigua and Barbuda without getting out on the bounding main is akin to doing Paris and giving the Eiffel Tower a miss.

In short, sailing into the sunset is the quickest, surest way of gauging the pulse of this oh-so-nautical waypoint.



If you're looking for a home on the water, check out Falmouth – Antigua's answer to 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous'

If you know how to sail you can "bareboat" – rent the boat from either Horizon Yacht Charters or Sunsail and sail it yourself.

Might want to come down for Sailing Week and sign up as crew with OnDeck, a company that both teaches you the fundamentals and lets you race on their yachts.

Both nowadays and historically, Antigua is one of the sailing capitals of the Caribbean.

Perfect place to channel your inner pirate.

HANGING WITH HORATIO

Come sailing in Antigua and you've tapped into the wellspring of tradition and history.

Even ashore you get the idea: Antigua was once headquarters of the Royal Navy fleet.

Visit Nelson's Dockyard and you'll feel like you're hanging with Horatio Nelson himself, England's most illustrious admiral who was stationed here for three years.

That legacy has translated to Antigua being a must-do for your inner historian.

But the Dockyard's hardly the only repository for history.

Climb the heights over Deep Bay and explore colonial ruins, visit Betty's Hope and discover the remains of a sugar plantation, do lunch and check out local art in a refurbished centuries' old sugar mill at Harmony Hall or just stroll the narrow alleys of historic Redcliffe Quay, sipping fine wine or uncovering that must-have fashion accessory.

And immerse yourself in history even after the sun goes down.

AFTER THE SUN GOES DOWN

It's twilight.

You're dancing to steel drum melodies on a cobblestone erstwhile parade ground, high above the Caribbean, ringside to one of the best sunset spots in the Greater Antilles.

Welcome to the weekly fete at Shirley Heights.

Even when the sun goes down Antigua keeps going.

Find that perfect watering hole on the road linking the Dockyard and Falmouth, catch live jazz at a Dickenson Bay hotel bar.

Or just opt for dinner.

Go casual: Trappas on the "strip" near Falmouth or beachside Bumpkins at Pigeon Point. Bask in the historic waterside ambiance of Pillars in English Harbour, catch Seafood Fridays at the Copper and Lumber Store, maybe go haute cuisine.

Looking for fun when the sun is gone? Want to titillate the taste buds?

Welcome to Antigua.

Even when the sun goes down.

A PLACE TO LAY YOUR HEAD

Maybe the best reason to visit is the variety of accommodation you'll find here.

Go ex-pat and book your very own villa or spend your nights in historic inns like Admiral or Ocean Inn, a hostelry overlooking English Harbour.

Maybe find that middle ground: elegant but affordable, maybe family-friendly. Think Sugar Ridge at Jolly Beach, Halcion by Rex, book a week at ultra-family-friendly Verandah, complete with daycare.

Or take your luxe up a few notches. Think Hermitage. Or Curtain Bluff.

Think your own rock house with sunset terrace at Blue Waters, think bespoke cabana on the amber sands of Carlisle Bay.

The numerous options – the multitude of places to lay your head – provide even more great reasons to visit Antigua.

In case seven aren't enough.

Photos by Sharon Matthews - Stevens



Mark Stevens, is an award-winning Canadian travel writer and past Co-president of the Travel Media Association of Canada.

Saint Lucia: Inspiration Island

by Mark Stevens

Right from the beginning St. Lucia inspires me.

We're driving to our villa perched high on a hill – a former cocoa and coconut plantation called Stonefield Villa Resort. It's a secluded oasis snugged down in the lee of Petit Piton. Sun and shadows of passing clouds etch and paint the precipitous slopes of this towering mountain, presenting a never-changing and ever-changing vista.

Already the scenery mesmerizes me.

The road from the south rises and falls and turns upon itself like an amusement park ride but today there are no midway hawkers; just beauty.

Sheer beauty.

The countryside is lush and velvety, a concatenation of a hundred types of trees and shrubs and flowering bougainvillea in every shade of red.

Imagine here every hue and tint of green in a master artist's palette. Imagine here a verdant landscape reminiscent of an emerald quilt rumpled up and tossed upon a bed of blue – cobalt seas and turquoise shallows.

Follow the road and reach for the sky two thousand feet high then dip like a prima ballerina in a pas de deux with rock-strewn shores, or a beach where wooden fishing boats wait for dawn, where a church steeple would dominate the landscape at Anse la Raye – past another town with the evocative name of Soufriere, nestled between a mountain and the sea – but for the fact that these voluptuous heights won't be dominated by anything.

I have traveled the Caribbean far and wide but I have seen very few islands so lasciviously beautiful, so starkly dramatic as St. Lucia – thanks to both her expanses of rainforest and the tempestuous volcano origins whose influence continues today in Sulphur Springs, a geothermal field where steam rises up from scattered slope-side vents like disembodied spirits.



A view of Marigot Bay, a harbour novelist James Michener once rated as the Caribbean's prettiest.

I am inspired.

Inspired by Nature

Over breakfast at the Mango Tree Restaurant at Stonefield I notice a water pistol on the table. "Keeps the birds away," says our server.

A pair of bullfinches alights on the railing beside our table, trying to steal bread. A hummingbird hovers beside the mango tree, heavy with fruit, overlooking the pool. A lizard lazes in the sun on the same railing, beside stone steps descending to banana plants and papaya trees.

Onsite a forest trail falls away toward pre-Columbian petroglyphs. In coming days, we'll climb to the top of the world at nearby Tet Paul Nature Trail (designed and managed by locals), gazing out between both Pitons.

Talk about being inspired by nature.

On St. Lucia you can hike the Enbas Saut Trail, stopping to swim in a waterfall; go bird watching on a quest for the St. Lucia Parrot; stretch yourself and climb Gros Piton or Gimie, St. Lucia's tallest peak.

Even the hotels get in on the act, synchronous with the surrounding beauty.

The villas at Stonefield are designed so you can only see the sea or the surrounding vegetation. Nearby Ladera Resort, as well as Anse Chastanet and Jade Mountain, boast rooms with only three walls to ensure that you and the land are one.

Nature, history and culture – natural woods and Amerindian decorations – inform the decor at Ladera and Anse. Even Jade, though futuristic in design, pays tribute to traditional materials and the proximity and primacy of nature.

Fond Doux reclines in a valley of cocoa trees and African tulips. The natural setting and the views at Marigot Bay Resort define this property embracing a bay James Michener called "the most beautiful in the Caribbean."

Go north and nature still inspires. The lobby of Calabash Cove sports a beautiful blue marble floor inspired

by sea and sky, a dining room open to the sea. The villas at Windjammer Landing are sky-reaching and nestled in bouquets of poinciana and hibiscus.

But nature's inspiration hardly ends there.

Visit the Castries market on a Saturday morning and you're enveloped in the bounty of both the land and the sea.

Stall after stall of yams and bananas, of mangos and cinnamon, spices and oils infused with nature herself. At one little eatery called "Super Sexy" the proprietor frequently provides free food to those in need.

Inspired to generosity.

And the wealth of nature's own generosity is equally inspiring when it comes to cuisine.

Inspiring – and Inspired – Cuisine

Just across from a cemetery in Soufriere, in a spot with breath-taking views of both the sea and the Pitons, we discover Orlando's Restaurant and Bar.

Chef Orlando Sachell's there when we pull in and we do lunch with him.

"I am a chef on a mission," he says, delivering his own take on fish and chips. One of the best meals on island.

No small feat, though Sachell is up to the challenge. We're not here by accident: eight years ago we dined at Ladera's Dasheene Restaurant where he'd been the chef. I remember that meal like it was yesterday.

When we discovered he had his own place now, our trusty driver, Vienney De Freitas, with all the instincts of a Scotland Yard detective, discovered its location.

"The landscape, our history, our culture, these are all important," says Orlando. "I believe we can offer a true Caribbean cuisine and I am committed to that."

His inspired – and inspiring – cuisine is just the beginning.

One night we venture out to the 'Jump-Up' at Gros Islet. There, amid pounding bass grooves, a river of locals and tourists alike, omnipresent blue barbecue smoke, we sample local delicacies along with everyone else. Jerk chicken, fresh fish, "bake" - a sort of fried bread, and fresh corn on the cob.

Cuisine and joie de vivre join hands there every Friday night.

For that matter, you'd have to be a Scotland Yard detective to find a bad meal on island.

At Windjammer Landing (ostensibly at least partly an all-inclusive resort) we have the best roti outside of Trinidad and Tobago. At Calabash Cove we dine on Red Snapper that melts in your mouth, a repast infused with a Creole insouciance by local spices.

Inspired to Wellness

Whether we are dining in the bosom of nature herself, strolling through lush gardens or climbing the steps of the "Stairway to Heaven" on the Tet Paul Trail, we are also inspired to wellness.

Wellness on St. Lucia is both inspiration and an island must-do.

One afternoon I am simmering in the mud baths at Sulphur Springs. A local man – maybe thirty-something – stands at the edge of the pool. A lady beside me looks at him, says, "Do you ever come in the mud baths?"

"Certainly," he says, "can't you tell? I am a hundred years old."

On another afternoon, after a couples' Swedish massage at Stonefield's Escape Spa, I lounge on the verandah looking out at the sea, at Petit Piton. Every nerve in my body is relaxed.

Our treatment at the Spa at Windjammer is inspired by both local aromas and local tradition – the process includes a soothing application using bamboo sticks and hot stones. The Aurigo Spa at Marigot Bay Resort includes a unique St. Lucia treatment; seek your wellness in "Fond Doux" spa in a secluded corner of the valley surrounded by lush vegetation in a structure built from bamboo.

If you're not inspired to wellness here you are beyond hope.



Guests enjoying a mud bath in the mineral rich Sulphur Springs.

Inspiration Island

It's our last full day on-island and our gondola is descending the side of a mountain high above the forest floor at Rainforest Adventures. It gradually slows and then comes to a stop.

For a few moments our guide is silent.

Suspended there, swaying gently like a baby in a cradle, we inhale the rich earthy aroma of forest, the seductive smell from nearby incense trees. Hummingbirds flit around other trees, ignoring us, enjoying the same view we have.

It is silent there but for the whisper of the wind in the trees and a sudden chorus of birdcalls.

When the aerial car begins to move again our guide, Anna, begins to gesture to either side, above us and below us.

"There's an African Tulip there, look at the thrashers, smell the incense, there is a ficus, over there are avocados, mangos," she says, as if overwhelmed by nature's munificence, as if inspired to share every single feature.

Once off the car Anna guides us on a little forest hike. We stop and inhale, we stroll across a bridge spanning a lazy stream, and we cross into a sun-dappled glade decorated with a kaleidoscope of color.

Welcome to "Inspiration Island."

Photos by Sharon Matthews - Stevens

Bedazzled by Belize

by Mark Stevens

For the past two hours we've been sailing south from an island group called Pelican Cayes.

Before we raised anchor we snorkeled off an uninhabited beach. The snorkeling – replete with forests of coral and schools of fish that could hold their own in a big city aquarium – was some of the best I have ever done. And I have snorkeled in some appealing spots.

It's hardly surprising given our location.

We've been spending the past few days exploring some of the out islands of Belize, crown jewel of Central America, scattered like a ransom of precious jewels along the world's second longest living barrier reef, a treasury of undersea bounty and healthy coral that runs for something like one hundred ninety miles off the country's coast. The wealth of islands Belize boasts is equally impressive: roughly 450 islands and cayes recline in the bath-tub warm waters nuzzling her shores.

And now we discover another one: Moho Caye.

Think sapphire and neon lime waters, emerald palms that dance seductively in gentle breezes, alabaster sands. Think a spot where, when we raise anchor and sail west toward the mainland, three dolphins cavort beside the boat.

Here at Moho Caye, I bore my wife and our friends from Canada. That's because I keep repeating myself over and over again, while dining al fresco in the cockpit of our boat, while donning our snorkel gear once more, while lounging on a perfect beach sipping a Belikin beer.

"Most beautiful place in the world," I exclaim. Over and over again.

For that is the chief characteristic of this country despite allures that range from islands like these to beach towns evocative of the "old" Caribbean, from lush rugged mountains to Mayan temples and pyramids at sites like Xunantunich and Caracol.



Getting away from it all at Thatch Caye

Unspoiled? Yes. Historical? Yes. Supernatural? Yes.

But on our second to last day here it is one impression that dominates.

I've been bedazzled by the beauty of Belize.

And I'm not the only one who feels that way.

Belize properties, excursions and tourism initiatives have been nominated in the prestigious World Travel Awards more than thirty times over the past decade.

Belize celebrated more than half a million overnight arrivals in 2019, which is 100 percent growth in the overnight tourism sector in the past decade. 2023 arrival figures have shown 91 percent recovery post Covid-19, when compared to arrival figures of 2019.

Given that popularity – coupled with the fact that some of the appeal is her unspoiled, pristine quality – maybe you'd better rush to book your flight. Because Belize is remarkably accessible.

Unspoiled? Yes. Hard to get to? No.

The international airport at Belize City is a five-hour flight from New York, just an hour-and-a-half from Miami. During high season Westjet offers non-stop flights out of Toronto and Calgary (flying time: under five hours). United flies once a week out of Chicago year-round and twice weekly out of Newark. Delta offers daily flights out of Atlanta and American offers Charlotte to Belize City flights.

In December, JetBlue will begin non-stop service between New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) and Belize's Philip S. W. Goldson International Airport three times a week.

If you do choose to visit, let's keep Belize our little secret.

When we left our boat at anchor at Pelican Caye last night, we went ashore to a secluded mangrove island to dine at the restaurant at Hideaway Caye, housed in a hardwood open dining room with a thatched roof and hand-hewn bar. Think a dastardly rum punch served by co-proprietor Dustin Ingersoll, an American ex-pat.

Follow that up with dinner (catch of the day: caught that morning by Dustin) prepared in an open kitchen by his wife, Kim.

We were the only guests.

A couple of days ago, we visited Thatch Caye for Happy Hour, watching a perfect sunset over blue-gray mountains on the mainland, chilling in hammocks, chatting with Thatch Caye Resort guests.

The sunset, it should be noted, was bedazzling.

But don't be fooled. Belize is more than just a pretty face, for she boasts a bounty of delights and a backstory as long as your arm.

Once known as British Honduras, her name was officially changed in 1973 and she achieved independence in 1981, though she continues as a member of the British Commonwealth. But that's only the final chapter.

During the seventeenth century she played host to pirates. She was a hotbed of Mayan civilization during what was called the Classic Period (lasting from 250 to 900 C.E.), though there are settlements here that date back to 1500 B.C.E.

That backstory contributes to many of her singular attractions.

Archeological sites abound here.

Discover Nim Li Punit in the south, best known for its collection of stelae (upright intricately carved statues). Altun Ha is the most convenient site if you're based in Belize City. Xunantunich boasts a pyramid-like structure rising up more than a hundred feet.

Or just check out Marco Gonzalez site on Ambergris Caye, since odds are that this will be your pied-à-terre since it's Belize's most popular destination.

But maybe your druthers lean more to nature than nurture. Not to worry.

Our first night in the village of Placencia we go out for dinner and discover, upon our return to our chartered sailboat, two coatimundis trying to steal some bananas.

One place we anchored is known for its manatees, though we don't find any.

In April or May, you can snorkel with whale sharks. Then there's the rainforest.

Just west of our base at Placencia, we discover Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, home to two hundred jaguars, recognized as the world's first jaguar reserve.

Not likely to see any, but once in Belize you can go river-tubing, explore jungle waterfalls or go on a hike in search of the Scarlet Macaw. For Belize is a nature lover's delight, boasting three nature reserves, five wildlife sanctuaries and fifteen forest reserves.

But the country is not just a haven for tree-huggers.

One day we pull into South Water Caye and anchor off a beach of blinding white sand decorated by dancing palms and the diaphanous fronds of casuarina trees.

This is no ordinary patch of heaven (though the rustic hardwood main lodge at Pelican Beach Resort was once a retreat for the Sisters of Mercy order of nuns). South Water Caye is Belize's largest protected marine area. Pelican itself boasts a long-time research partnership with the Smithsonian Institute while nearby IZE (International Zoological Expeditions) offers rudimentary accommodation and great food to groups participating in a variety of ecological studies.

But it's the beach here that does it for me, just one of a multitude of sandy stretches that also makes Belize a beach bum must-do.

Consider secluded Tranquility Bay Beach Resort on Ambergris Caye or chill with the in-crowd at X'Tan Ha.

Or go for the big time: book a visit to Placencia.

One day we stroll a sort of concrete boardwalk there (talk about fitting: the town's very name means "Pleasant Place"), past seaside restaurants and bars, past Art'N'Soul Art Gallery, laid-back resorts and pastel-painted huts selling land and sea excursions. Come ashore here and check out the gigantic red Adirondack chair on ivory-colored sand then follow the shoreline up the seaward side of this long peninsula in the country's south.

Think sixteen miles of beach.

It's our last full day in paradise, lounging in beach chairs beside a beach bar with the perfect name. Welcome to "Barefoot Bar", a rainbow of painted wooden decks and picnic tables, a place that serves, mere steps from the sea, a frosty mango colada.

Between lunch (ginger lime shrimp) and a quick dip (washed down with the libation in question), I plunk myself back down and reflect on our Belize experiences.

I consider Belize culture: a mix of Mestizo, Maya, Garifuna, Creole and even Mennonite that shows itself both in festivals like San Pedro's Carnival or Garifuna Settlement Day in November and in the wealth of cuisine you'll discover here (we went local last night at Omar's Creole Grub in Placencia).

I consider her history: home to Mayan settlements for more than a millennium, a bounty of archeological sites.

I consider her natural wonders.

And now I look over at my wife and say, over just one more mango colada, "I'd come back in a New York minute."

For I am smitten, I am mesmerized. I am bedazzled by Belize.

Photo: Sharon Matthews-Stevens

Mark Stevens is an award-winning Canadian travel writer and past Co-President of the Travel Media Association of Canada (TMAC).



It's Better in the Bahamas

by Mark Stevens

I first visited the Bahamas many years ago, accompanied by forty-five teenagers.

In an earlier life I was a high school band teacher and I'd brought my student musicians to Nassau for a music festival and several performances.

We played a concert at Rawson Square in downtown Nassau, a crowd of mostly Bahamians forming the audience. After the final selection they rose in a standing ovation and clapped enthusiastically.

Two days on the island and already I'd bonded with the folks who called these islands home.

At the time two thoughts continuously cycled through my brain.

First, I was struck by the Bahamians' joie de vivre.

The second thought had been infesting my brain since long before we even touched down here.

Anticipating that first visit here I'd taken particular interest in an advertising campaign overtaking the airwaves back in Canada. It extolled the Bahamas' appeal: images of alabaster beaches, colonial architecture, turquoise seas, Bahamians celebrating a local festival called Junkanoo.

A jingle accompanying these visuals become a melody I played over and over in my head – for weeks at a time before we arrived, for the entire duration of that first visit.

I've since returned to the Bahamas four more times and even nowadays the words (and melody) of that simple tune haunt me, expressing a truth I've since discovered time and time again.

The text of that irresistible ditty?

"It's better in the Bahamas."



Great place for the weekly pig roast: Nipper's Beach Bar on Great Guana Cay in the Abacos

IT'S BETTER IN NASSAU

During our most recent Nassau visit my wife Sharon and I choose the sprawling resort of Baha Mar for our home base.

Encompassing three different hotels (the SLS, Hyatt and Rosewood), Baha Mar is a vacation destination in its own right.

We splash and slide in Baha Bay, the onsite water park. We lounge beachside before discovering the greens on the Jack Nicklaus signature Royal Blue golf course, we lob balls on one of many tennis courts – both grass and clay. We visit the onsite art gallery, considering an art lesson, though the allure of ESPA spa proves too appealing to miss.

We try our luck at the Caribbean's biggest casino in the Hyatt, we dine at several of the nearly three dozen restaurants, doing haute cuisine seafood at Marcus Fish and Chop House, going Mediterranean at Cleo.

But irresistible though the delights of Baha Mar may be, we soon choose to further explore Nassau itself.

We stroll Bay Street, stopping at the Straw Market for local arts and crafts, browsing world-class stores for fashion and jewelry, we take in the august colonial masterpieces of architecture like the coral-painted Government House.

We visit Fort Charlotte west of the city before stopping at Fort Fincastle and descending the Queen's Staircase, an engineering marvel built by six hundred enslaved persons.

We sample local rum at a distillery called John Watling's, housed in an elegant colonial great house (a setting that was film set for part of a James Bond movie called "Casino Royale"), before taking in a delightful lesson introducing us to Junkanoo, a Bahamian must-do.

At the Educulture Junkanoo Museum, a labor of love for curator Arlene Nash-Ferguson, we get another taste of that joie de vivre I'd found so appealing years before.

Guided by Nash-Ferguson herself, we're introduced to the roots of this festival, from sample costumes to interactive displays, a lesson in both history and culture.

Each year on Boxing Day and New Years' Even the streets of Nassau come alive with African-inspired music and the Bahamas' own answer to Carnival.

But Junkanoo's hardly limited to Nassau.

IT'S BETTER IN THE ABACOS

On the last night – New Years' Eve – of our first visit to the Abacos in the Bahamas' northerly reaches, my wife and I book a bayside resort in the historic village of Hopetown, a delightful oasis guarded by the postcard-worthy candy cane lighthouse.

As the old year becomes new, we're entertained by a fireworks display over the harbor, the sky transformed into a rainbow of color.

Shortly after midnight we join a conga line of visitors and Bahamians alike, dancing and clapping to the rhythms and melodies of a band clad in African-influenced regalia.

Welcome to Junkanoo.

But this celebration is hardly the Abacos' only appeal.

Visit Man'o'War Cay and stroll the village streets past colonial buildings and learn about the history of local boatbuilding. Browse the shops or hit a beach you'll share with no one; snorkel off a reef mere yards from shore.

Go north to Green Turtle Cay and explore New Plymouth, a whole village of history.

The back-story of the Abacos is both fascinating and unique. It was settled by United Empire Loyalists, so much of the architecture is quintessential New England.

Marvel at the Cape Cod style homes scattered through the islands though these masterpieces are painted lemon and lime and coral and periwinkle.

Dance away a Sunday afternoon on Great Guana Cay at Nippers, a rainbow-coloured bar and restaurant perched cliffside above a pristine beach, before sampling the gustatory delights of the weekly pig roast.

On our last visit to the Abacos we charter a sailboat, inviting friends from home, thrilled to share these islands with them.

As we sail toward Marsh Harbour, our final waypoint, we're joined by a trio of dolphins cavorting beside the boat.



A perfect Nassau place to dine — seaside at Compass Point Resort Restaurant.

I look at my friend Ed, shouting over the sound of the wind.

"It really is better in the Abacos, isn't it?"

"The best," he yells in reply. "The very best."

IT'S BETTER IN THE EXUMAS

Given the allure of the Abacos I was understandably unbelieving when, researching another upcoming sailing trip, I was regaled with tales of the delights of the Exumas.

Until we arrived.

For all the hustle and bustle of Nassau or the historical delights of the Abacos, the Exumas are the ideal place to get away from it all.

Lest you wonder whether it's better in the Exumas consider this: John Travolta, Nicholas Cage and Johnny Depp all own private islands here.

Think a year's worth of islands and cays stretching north from Great Exuma itself (the most populous island in the chain). Make your way north to Little Exuma, continue north to a collection of Robinson-Crusoe-worthy islands, some completely uninhabited.

At Warderick Wells, in a protected area called Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park, we encounter nurse sharks circling our chartered sailboat, we visit Allan's Cay populated only by iguanas, we go ashore at Norman's Cay and dine at MacDuff's, a casual and rustic eatery where we're the only guests.

Book an Exuma excursion and swim with pigs or nurse sharks, snorkel a fascinating cave system called Thunderball Grotto, yet one more filming location for yet one more James Bond movie.

Or simply feel that ultimate island vibe and do nothing.Find a beach to call your own and your day will just get better and better.

IT'S BETTER IN THE BAHAMAS

On our last Nassau night on our last Bahamas visit, my wife and I savor a final perfect sunset at the Sunset



Exploring ashore in the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park.

Beach Club in Nassau's west end.

Here, as we await our dinner order of conch fritters followed by the catch of the day, I sip a Kalik beer (so named for the sound of cowbells that were an omnipresent accompaniment to Junkanoo).

I savor the growing twilight and allow myself a few moments of complaisance before the realization hits me.

Despite our numerous visits, we've barely scratched the surface.

Something like seven hundred distinct islands here, scattered across an area of 100,000 square miles of the Atlantic.

We've visited a mere two dozen.

We have yet to do Eleuthera and Harbour Island – with that pastel-painted architecture reminiscent of Hopetown. We have yet to experience the laid-back ambiance of Andros. We have yet to bond with Bimini.

At first humbled, I soon take solace in another reality.

I know that one day we'll return because one thing is certain.

It really *is* better in the Bahamas.

Photo: Sharon Matthews-Stevens

Mark Stevens is an award-winning Canadian travel writer and past Co-President of the Travel Media Association of Canada (TMAC).



Barbados: the Destination with Something for Everyone!

by Zahra Spencer

Whether it's your first trip to Barbados, or you're a seasoned visitor to these beautiful shores, you'll quickly discover that Barbados is a place you want to return to, time and time again. The true magic of this tiny, easterly island that locals proudly describe as "the gem of the Caribbean Sea", is that it feels both familiar and fresh. The warmth of its people, the tastiness of its food and its vibrant, energetic culture will always make you feel right at home—but you'll also see that the island is a dynamic one, constantly evolving, so each visit is never the same as the last.

We like to say Barbados has a place for every kind of traveler—the foodie, the thrill-seeker, the historian, and of course, the beach lovers! It's a family friendly destination and the perfect romantic getaway for lovebirds. Whether you're traveling for business or pleasure, Barbados truly has something for everyone—keep reading to discover more about why your next getaway should be to Barbados!



Visitors enjoying the Friday night Oistin's Fish Fry

Where to eat:

What's a vacation without lots of delicious eats? Well luckily, Barbados has plenty options, no matter your palette or price point!

No trip to Barbados is complete without a visit to Oistins fish fry on a Friday night. Located in the heart of Barbados' primary fishing village, Oistins, the weekly Friday night fish fry is a festive night out, complete with music, karaoke, and of course, plenty of food! There are plenty of stalls, with vendors serving typical Bajan fare, like rice and peas, breadfruit, macaroni pie and of course, all kinds of fish! And speaking of fish, make sure to grab a traditional Bajan fish cutter from Cuz's fish shack by Pebbles Beach—it's one of the highest rated spots on Trip Advisor!

Also located on the south coast is Worthing Square Food Garden where you'll find a fully stocked outdoor bar, plenty of seating and a variety of food trucks, with every kind of cuisine, from Asian to Bajan and much more! The Village Bar at Lemon Arbor is a great option to experience traditional Bajan food in one of our famous rum shops, and Cocktail Kitchen in St. Lawrence Gap is a favorite of locals and tourists alike! Zemi Café is a standout dining option if you're looking for delicious eats and a tranquil view of the stunning east coast of Barbados.

For more formal dining options, enjoy restaurants like Champers and Primo on the south coast, and QP Bistro, Tides, The Local and Co., and the Bearded Rose on the idyllic west coast of the island!

Where to stay

Barbados has three main coasts where visitors typically stay, and they each have a different sort of character. The south coast of the island is energetic, vibrant and fun. It's ideal for those who want to be in the heart of where all the action is! There are lots of accommodation options for those looking to stay in that area from all-inclusive hotels to Airbnb and guest houses. The Rockley is one such hotel that is in a prime location, directly across from Accra beach and within walking distance of many restaurants and shopping options, and is just outside the heart of the capital city, Bridgetown!

If you're looking for a more luxurious experience, the west coast of the island, also known as the 'platinum coast' might be more your speed. It is home to a number of luxury villas and hotels, many of which are frequented by celebrities when they visit the island. If you want to golf on some of the most exclusive courses

and dine at the finest restaurants the island has to offer, all while staying at a luxury resort, then the west coast is perfect. Finally, the east coast of the island, home to the famous 'Soup Bowl' and the Scotland District, is well away from the hustle and bustle. It's a nature lover's dream, with scenic views and lots of open-air spaces. It is ideal for travelers who are truly hoping to 'go off the grid' during their vacation. It's a great area to stay if you're into surfing, wellness retreats, hiking and other outdoors activities!



Tourists exploring Harrison's Caves

Where to shop

You won't lack for shopping options when you're in Barbados, even if you're only looking for a souvenir or two! Pelican Village in Bridgetown is an excellent option for local fares such as artisanal candles, pottery and other handmade items. Haymans Market located in a refurbished sugar plantation in Speightstown, St. Peter, is one of the newest shopping experiences in Barbados. It's a great spot to shop, dine and even enjoy live entertainment. The stores at Haymans are all locally owned with everything from jewelry to locally sourced perfumes!

If a luxury shopping experience is what you're after, Limegrove Lifestyle Center in Holetown is home to many of the high-end brands like Bvlgari, Breitling, and Michael Kors, as well as local luxury boutiques and delicious cafes.



Guests sampling rum at Mount Gay Distilleries

Where to play

While we're known for our amazing sun, sea and sand, there's so much more to Barbados than just the beach—but of course, that should be your first stop! Beach clubs like Copacabana and the Boatyard are great places to spend the day where you can relax on beach chairs, enjoy watersports and grab a bite when you get hungry. For an exciting water adventure, book a Cool Runnings catamaran tour and sail along the coast of Barbados, with stops along the way for a quick dip or to swim with the turtles!

Harrison's Cave, one of Barbados' most stunning natural wonders, will amaze you. After all, how often do you get the chance to explore an underground cave? Located at Chukka adventure park, Harrison's Cave isn't the only thing to do! Go ziplining, try your hand at the obstacle course, visit the aviary and enjoy a delicious lunch at the onsite restaurant!

Of course, you can't spend time in the birthplace of rum without a rum tour! The Mount Gay Rum Distillery tour is an excellent option to sample a variety of local rums and learn more about the history and heritage of rum in the country of its birth.

And of course, be sure to keep some dates in mind, because Barbados is home to a so many world-renowned festivals! From July to the first week of August, experience Crop Over, also known as the sweetest summer festival! Then in October, mark your calendars for the ultimate foodie dream weekend: the award-winning, Barbados Food and Rum festival, coming up this October 24-27, 2024. Then we close out the year a little differently, with the Caribbean's biggest marathon weekend, Run Barbados, December 6-8, 2024. It's perfect for every fitness level, with distances ranging from a mile to a full marathon!

This is just a taste of everything there is to do in Barbados! It's the perfect getaway no matter the kind of experience you are after and I'm afraid words simply can't do this beautiful island justice—which means you'll simply have to book a flight and come see for yourself!



Zahra Spencer is a Barbados-based Travel Writer.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines

A Bounty of Blesséd Islands

by Mark Stevens

It's late afternoon on our final day of exploring a bounty of islands called St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

My wife and I are at Sandal's newest resort, lounging on an icing sugar sand beach cradled by towering emerald hills and rugged rock formations nuzzled by waters the color of heaven itself: sapphire, aquamarine, jade. Those cerulean shades now seem perfect metaphor for the feelings that have flooded my very soul for the past few days.

Sipping an icy Piña Colada, I turn in my beach chair, gazing behind me toward a procession of mountains so green, so lush, so voluptuous, I feel their sheer beauty in the pit of my stomach.

Even as I breathe in this spectacle, cumulous clouds shroud the highest peaks, lending a mystical quality to the vista.

It is fitting background for an equally compelling foreground.

In the near distance is a collection of restaurants – Parisol Beach Club where we did lunch, a brand-new farm-to-table spot called Buccan, where we'll shortly do dinner.

Beach houses recline just beyond; past them are five acres of landscaped grounds populated by several pools and decorated with a rainbow of flowering shrubs and foliage every shade of green.

This week we have climbed mountains and cooled in waterfalls snugged down in a lush rainforest setting. Under sail we have explored neighboring islands as beautiful as this one, discovering first-hand why these islands have earned their reputation as one of the world's best sailing destinations.

We have experienced history, sharing in the celebration of Easter and the love of the sea with Vincies.

Here on the beach at Sandals – an oasis truly worthy of the allure of these islands themselves – I revisit our memories.

I am feeling truly blessed, which should be no surprise at all.

For we are spending our last day on St. Vincent, an island whose original name reflected that very sentiment.



"Double-enders" — traditional wooden sailing sloops — preparing for race start during the first annual SVG Sailing Week.

LAND OF THE BLESSÉD

The thirty-two-member archipelago called the Grenadines were among the last islands to be settled by European colonists. More than once this week I wonder if that might partly account for a laid-back vibe almost unique in the Caribbean.

Spanish sailors encountering Grenada itself were reputedly reminded of the island's similarity to Granada in the old world.

At first called "la Grenade," when the English eventually took control of that island they Anglicized the name to "Grenada." Somewhere in the process a version of the Spanish for "little Grenada" – Grenadines – took hold as the name for these islands we're currently exploring.

While it's been commonly thought that St. Vincent itself was so named because Columbus sighted it on the feast day of St. Vincent, it's since been established that he was in Spain on the day in question and likely never even saw the island.

Be that as it may, it's the island's original Carib name that I find so evocative.

It was called Haroun. The land of the Blesséd.

NATURE'S BOUNTY

During our first visit roughly fourteen years ago, we rose before dawn one morning to leave our accommodations at Young Island Resort for a hike along the Vermont Nature Trail and Rainforest in search of the endangered Vincy Parrot.

Young Island Resort is nestled in 12 acres of gardens, boasting cottages decorated with wicker furnishings and local art, cottages offering hillside views, cottages snugged down at water's edge.

Despite the fact we never actually saw a parrot, our adventure proved rewarding. We negotiated a serpentine path through dense foliage, learning on the way about the wealth of vegetation surrounding us, with sheer delight we savored the magnificent vistas of the surrounding forest.

Later that day we traversed the Mesopotamia Valley and sampled some roasted breadfruit – a delicious sample of nature's bounty.

During our first full day on St. Vincent on this trip we explore the west coast by car, a rollercoaster ride of switchback turns and precipitous drops, treated to unspeakably gorgeous sea views, to vistas of towering forest-clad hills.

Clearing one ridge we see the Pitons hovering in the distance on neighboring St. Lucia; the heights ascending Soufriere volcano on St. Vincent itself.

After a seaside lunch of "provisions", we enter the forest and hike to Darkview Falls, cooling off in a pool lounging at its base.

Our guide tells me that these islands have been recognized by the World Travel Awards as "Best Nature Destination."

I am not surprised.

Nature's bounty is boundless here in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

A BOUNTY OF HISTORY AND CULTURE

But these islands also offer a bounty of both history and culture.

Their history has resulted in a veritable pepperpot of delights for history buffs or visitors seeking to experience a vibrant cultural scene.

Strolling downtown Kingstown we take in samples of both French and English colonial architecture. We ascend the heights six hundred feet above Kingstown itself, getting a lesson in the archipelago's often bellicose history at Fort Charlotte.

At the nineteenth-century St. George's Anglican Cathedral we're taught the story of the Garifuna, descendants of African slaves and indigenous Kalinago.

We soak up more local culture in a Kingstown must-do, dining on roti at Vee Jay's, a family-run restaurant bustling with hungry Vincies.

On nearby Bequia we learn about the whaling culture that breathed life into the island for more than 150 years, a culture still celebrated when a whale is caught using traditional methods.

But history's hardly the only appeal of these islands.

Easter weekend on Bequia is a must-do, celebrating in music, in sailing events featuring those traditional double-ended sloops that are central to the Easter Regatta (now partnered with the first ever St. Vincent and Grenadines Sailing Week).

Visit in summertime for Vincy Mas, the chain's answer to Carnival; come before Christmas for the unique celebrations of Nine Mornings. Partake of the culinary delights and festivities marking the annual Breadfruit Festival.

Just more fabulous offerings in an instructive and enjoyable (and delicious) bounty of history and culture.



SVG's Canouan is an elegant and private island featuring a range of gorgeous properties including Soho Beach Club (shown here).

A BOUNTY OF BLESSINGS

That bounty abounds no matter which island – or islands – you visit.

Both Union Island and Petit St. Vincent were ravaged by Hurricane Beryl though latest reports suggest that rebuilding on the former is moving along. Unfortunately, PSV, a gorgeous private island resort, has yet to re-open.

Tobago Cays is an unspoiled marine park; snorkel with sea turtles or dine on barbecued lobster served at water's edge.

Get away from it all at nearby Mayreau, a must-do for visiting sailors, chilling at Saltwhistle Bay or sipping drinks at the Ranch Escapade, a charming if rudimentary waypoint on the island's windward side.

Lime with the rich and famous on the island of Mustique, an island once frequented by celebrities like Paul McCartney. Be sure to sip a drink at Basil's.

Book an elegant beachside room at Canouan's Soho Beach House or a hillside villa at Mandarin Oriental or Canouan Estates. Play a round on a golf course rated among the world's top ten.

Dock your mega yacht at Sandy Lane Yacht Club and Resorts and watch for celebrities at Shenanigans.

Next waypoint is Bequia, an island delight CNN Travel considers a must-do 2025 destination.

Go ashore and stroll the delightful boardwalk fronting Admiralty Bay, sampling the offerings of a wealth of bars and restaurants. Check out the ivory sands of Lower Bay or head to Friendship Bay, where you can learn island history at the museum there; savor the delights of Bequia Beach Resort, boasting some of the best Caribbean views you'll ever experience.

Or just find a resort – or island – to call your own. For the bounty of blessings you discover here is boundless.

A BOUNTY OF BLESSÉD ISLANDS

I have visited a multitude of Caribbean islands over the years, but St. Vincent and the Grenadines hold a special place in my heart – an island paradise so appealing this marks our fourth visit.

Vincies' joie-de-vivre is a big reason for my attraction but I'm also seduced by that unspoiled Caribbean charm almost unique to SVG, by the archipelago's show-stopping beauty, by the variety we've discovered here, from lush mountains to rainforest, from pristine beaches to a fascinating history and culture, from sheer luxury to barefoot ramblings embraced by sun, sea and sand.

Welcome to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Welcome to a bounty of blesséd islands.

Photos: Sharon Matthews-Stevens



Mark Stevens is an award-winning Canadian travel writer and past Co-President of the Travel Media Association of Canada (TMAC).

Grenada Memories:
Cinnamon Breezes and Nutmeg Paths

by Mark Stevens

It was the morning of the first day of our first visit to Grenada two decades ago, and I was already smitten.

After a car ride along a rollercoaster road snaking through rainforest, past rainbows of pastel-painted houses clinging to precipitous slopes decorated by the orange explosion of flowering flamboyant trees, our driver stopped beside a collection of great wooden drying trays, full of what looked like pumpkin-colored tree bark.

"Roll down your window," said our driver. "Inhale."

I inhaled: drying cinnamon.

Their aroma was wafted on high by omnipresent easterlies.

Fast forward twenty years: we are visiting the 17th-century Belmont Estate.

Exiting one building, negotiating a path beneath cocoa trees and nutmeg trees, I'm struck by the path beneath my feet.

I look down; I inhale.

Nutmeg shells line the path. Their aroma calls to mind that long-ago first morning here.

Cinnamon breezes and nutmeg paths.

Perfect metaphor for the delights of a tantalizing trio of islands.

A TANTALIZING TRIO

While that very first morning so many years ago ignited my passion, I would soon discover that the delights we'd encounter weren't limited to Grenada itself.

Three islands comprise this country.

Grenada is the most populous and biggest island, with an area of around 120 square miles. Carriacou, nearly 20 miles north, is home to only 6000 people in a 13-square-mile area. Petit Martinique, just east of Carriacou, is a mere square mile and less than a thousand people.



Many Caribbean regulars consider St. George's harbor the prettiest in the whole island chain.

Not surprisingly, Grenada is the best-known of the three, but each has its own unique appeal.

Visit Carriacou, and you feel like you've made landfall in the Caribbean of old, and you've certainly discovered the ideal destination to get away from it all.

Visit Petit Martinique, and Carriacou will feel like Manhattan.

First time in Petit Martinique, we dropped anchor near the jetty and were almost immediately invited to join a wedding feast in the meeting hall near the shore.

We felt like honorary Petit Martiniquians.

NATURAL WONDERS

Much of this destination's appeal for me is the abundance of natural wonders we find here.

All three islands are rugged and mountainous, offering dramatic and breathtaking vistas. Grenada is particularly lush, boasting great expanses of nearly pristine rainforest.

Grenada itself boasts 18 different waterfalls, from accessible Concord and Annandale Falls to a cascade deep in the forest called Seven Sisters, a more secluded oasis that requires a bit of a hike.

I've begun to understand why Grenada's a hikers' must-do.

One day, we ascend the walls of the crater at Grand Etang on the challenging trek to Mount Qua-Qua. I admittedly don't get far, turning back and happily discovering the appealing trail that circles the crater lake itself.

Serious hikers can challenge themselves with a 6-hour quest to conquer the nearly 3000-foot peak of Mountain Catherine, but no matter your fitness level, you can find a trail to delight.

Back at Grand Etang, during our latest visit, I'm smitten by the appeal of yet another natural wonder – a group of friendly Mona monkeys.

The memory of handfeeding one friendly primate will be forever etched on my consciousness.

And it's not just the interior that serves up natural wonders: for here in Grenada life can also be a beach.

Consider the secluded vibe of La Sagesse beach – snugged down in a green valley, nuzzled by sapphire waters in a protected cove along a swathe of sand you might share with almost no one else.

Check out the action at Grand Anse beach – home to beach bars, many of the more popular resorts and a variety of on-water activities and adventures. Or treat yourself to the laid-back vibe



Grenada boasts plenty of natural wonders - like Annandale Falls

of Morne Rouge, dominating a small cove to the south.

Dine at Carriacou's Paradise Beach Club, then stake your claim on Paradise Beach, a spot USA Today readers once rated the Caribbean's best beach. Hop a water taxi and make like Robinson Crusoe at Sandy Island or visit Tyrrell Bay in the south and savor the idyllic vision of sailboats swinging gently at anchor even as you swim and sun.

Visit Grenada and bond with nature – on a rainforest trail, making friends with Mono monkeys or simply soaking up some sun.

A HELPING OF HISTORY

Or maybe sample a helping of history.

Stroll downtown Saint George's to explore prime examples of Georgian architecture in. March up to the 17th century Fort George, commanding the approaches to the inner harbour and the Carenage with its own photogenic procession of historic buildings. Check out the views from Fort Frederick, a stronghold that's reputedly among the Caribbean's best-preserved fortifications.

Mix your history with sweets or spirits. Visit Belmont, a 17th-century former French estate and learn the story of chocolate – from cocoa bean to candy, all the while savoring the aroma wafting up from their nutmeg paths.

Sample some spirits and discover up-close-and-personal the history of rum-making at River Antoine Estate, where rum's made exactly the way it was two centuries ago.

Visit Carriacou's Windward village and see traditional boatbuilding in action – a centuries-old nautical tradition still alive and well.

Meet master boatbuilder Carl Enou and hear about the celebrations accompanying the launch of one of these historic vessels.

"Half the island gets in on it," says Enou, "from the boat blessing to food and rum, from local singing to a sacrifice made to ensure her safety and fair winds."

Just one more indication of the respect for tradition you'll find here on this tantalizing trio.

One more chance to sample a helping of history.

GRENADA MEMORIES

On our last night in Grenada, one more perfect sunset entertains my wife and I.

When daylight departs, we shift to Oliver's beachside restaurant at Spice Island Beach Resort, perusing the menu here in this luxurious Michelin-awarded retreat whose very name celebrates Grenada itself.

Founded by a Grenadian illuminato, Sir Royston Hopkin, it's 100% locally owned, and as elegant nowadays as the original inn Sir Royston purchased in the sixties was rustic.

Perfect pied-á-terre for exploring a perfect island, Spice Island Beach Resort is modern and sophisticated, though the 64 suites decorating the 8-acre property boast an almost colonial charm.

When our order of pan-seared barracuda arrives, we relish its flavors even as we relive Grenada memories, old and new.



Grenada tourism staffer Melinda Telesford bonds with a Mona monkey at Grand Etang

We fondly remember another perfect pied-á-terre from an earlier visit – the equally elegant and luxurious Sandals Resort, snugged down at Pink Gin Beach in Grenada's southwest corner.

We relive the delights of our secluded accommodation during that stay, a Rondoval Suite nestled in the bosom of nature, gourmet feasts like the spice-laden delights of appropriately named "Spices," just one of ten irresistible resort restaurants.

Now we share more memories of these delightful homes-away-from-home: Spice Island Beach Resort, with its unique Grenadian backstory, the Sandals property, a member of a seminal collection of resorts famed for their commitment to the Caribbean and its people.

As dessert arrives – a warm Spice Island Chocolate Brownie – we move on to a catalogue of our memories of Grenada itself: a tantalizing trio of islands, a bounty of natural wonders, a helping of history.

And memories of cinnamon breezes and nutmeg paths.

Photos: Sharon Matthews-Stevens



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