

TRAVEL

Barbados still has a lot to offer, but choose carefully where you stay and eat

KATIE WOOD

I have been going to Barbados every few years for over 30 years now. I know, you've already got two fingers down your throat, but, in my defence, it was always – genuinely – for work.

Grovels accepted? Hope so, because I want to tell you about a truly magical place.

I love the island – who doesn't? Ask anyone where they'd go if they were allowed to choose one place in the world for an all-expenses paid luxury holiday and, nine times out of 10, Barbados crops up.

It's a beautiful part of the world, and has a terrific mix of beaches, historic monuments, great restaurants, luxury hotels and superb climate.

Yes, it's expensive. Very, these days, though you can take a package or self-cater and still visit for considerably less.

Britain's second colony after Virginia, Barbados was settled in 1627 by the Brits and gained independence in 1966.

Despite being called 'Little England' – and it is undoubtedly the most British of all the Caribbean islands – that wasn't what the Bajans wanted, hence in 2021 it became a Republic and the Queen was ousted as Head of State. (Coincidentally Barbados also took 500 million US dollars from China, so safe to say, they really have moved on).

It had been five years since I'd previously visited, and I have to say things have not improved since they cut ties with 'us'.

Apart from the prices for everything from food to fuel having increased by an average of 30%, the infrastructure has deteriorated.

Step in the Chinese, with their massive injection of cash, earmarked to improve roads, sewage and hotels, though how many local Bajans will appreciate the 'Confucius Institute' to promote Chinese language and culture at the University of the West Indies remains to be seen.

But I digress, back to holidays and tourism. I'd be happier to see some of this huge amount of money spent on education for the hospitality sector, on which the island is so dependent. It is their future and they need to be the best to justify the price tags that Barbados relies on.

The sometimes-abrasive West Indian style of serving and talking to the customer does not sit well with the Brits and is far too prevalent, even in top-end establishments. Some serious hospitality training is required if they are to keep their crown as the number one Caribbean island to visit.

But then, the fact is Barbados has had it easy for a long time. Their PR image has been, and still is, second to none in the Caribbean and, in my opinion, a degree of complacency has crept in.

One place you don't really find it is the hotel I stayed in, 'The Crane' (www.thecrane.com) – a hotel that is set in 40



acres on the southeast coast and dates back to 1887.

With 318 rooms and suites, this cliff-top resort is an easy six minutes' east of Grantley Adams International Airport and has a spectacular natural setting on a cliff overlooking the powder-pink sands of Crane Beach. It has impressive restaurants, a relaxing spa with well-trained therapists, tennis and five outdoor pools.

At the heart of the resort, The Crane Village offers boutiques, duty-free retail shopping, a gym, a Calypso Kids Club and conference facilities. It really is the type of place that you could stay all week or two without feeling the need to venture out (though I hate that concept, personally).

The original hotel comprises 18 spacious oceanfront suites with high ceilings, hardwood floors and spectacular ocean views. They're gorgeous. I had one, and I can vouch for exactly how hard the

Clockwise from above: L'Azure Restaurant; the beach at The Crane Resort; the pool area; The Crane Village; and a typical ocean view suite



hardwood floors are as I sampled them when I fell out of the massive four-poster bed (trying to answer the phone) and cracked my elbow (eight weeks later, still on painkillers).

I forgave them because I had a better kitchen in my suite than my kitchen at home. If you have a special occasion to celebrate, just go for a suite.

I'd thought it would be more but apparently only 20% of their clientele are Brits, mainly booking through British Airways Holidays, Lotus Leisure Group and Kenwood. Other than that, you'll encounter US citizens and Northern Europeans.

Do NOT get into political debates with the US visitors – trust me.

Of the four restaurants available my favourite two were L'Azure, which has a cliff-top position overlooking the Atlantic shore – it's a good choice for Bajan dishes such as steamed flying fish and pan seared

mahi-mahi on spicy lentils.

For an alternative, Zen offers Japanese and Thai delicacies which have been Zagat rated number one for food in Barbados for two years running. Tasting menus feature things like Thai grilled marinated pork and a selection of nigiri sushi and teriyaki chicken. It's well worth booking for dinner.

Want to step outside? Fine, then go to St Nicholas Abbey and George Washington House.

St Nicholas is not actually an Abbey – it's a large plantation estate with a truly beautiful Jacobean Great House. It was built in 1658 and is one of only three existing in the Western Hemisphere. It is also still a working plantation, producing single cask rums (not worth the hangover, according to my travel pal).

The tour includes the Great House,



gardens, small museum, factory, distillery, a short movie circa 1930 and rum tasting.

The latest part-with-your-dollars attraction is a Victorian steam railway that goes all around the plantation and is really worth a try. Best of all, you get a superb view of the beautiful Scotland District on the East coast – settled by Scots sent out as slaves after the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion.

George Washington House was built about (don't you love it when they're having so much fun that they're just not sure...) 1717 and is the oldest residence in the Garrison Historic area – a UNESCO World Heritage site.

It was the rented accommodation for Lawrence Washington and his younger brother George, who went on to become the first US President. It became an officer's house within the 'new' British Military Garrison, and after the withdrawal of British troops in 1906 it was sold into

private ownership. The Georgian-style building is now an interesting museum that is well worth exploring as part of your Garrison visit.

I decided not to hire a car, and when I saw the size of the potholes and sparse signage, I was decidedly glad. Blimey, it was worse than Scotland!

Instead, I used an excellent taxi company that is basically the local equivalent of Uber.

PickupBarbados.com has over 400 licensed drivers, you know the fare in advance and can pre-book if desired. I had the same driver for my duration and it worked really well and was certainly no more expensive than car hire. You just download their app and can stay in touch by WhatsApp – simple and effective. No BS, I was seriously impressed and would use them again.

Two places that no foodie visitor to Barbados should miss are the exceptional restaurants of Changers and Tapas – the two best places to eat on the island.

Changers (www.changersrestaurant.com) is in the parish of Christchurch and my favourite on Barbados.

Beautifully located on the water's edge, it is super-chic (hey, it has its own art gallery featuring local artists) and the upstairs is air conditioned (great for menopausal women) but downstairs you can have a romantic meal in the warmth of the Caribbean breeze.

The food is truly excellent. I indulged in spiced shrimp taco, and a superb 10oz ribeye, with all the trimmings. Their wine list is one of the best on the island. If you're a canny Scot, you can eat for around £50 per person but booking ahead is essential, as this restaurant is now very well known.

Tapas (www.tapasbarbados.com) is my other recommendation. It's in a great location on the Boardwalk.

This Italian, also in Christchurch, is a wee gem. They don't actually serve tapas (after a chat with the owner, I don't think he actually knows what tapas are) but they definitely do have excellent pasta, fish and meat dishes of all varieties and a great selection of interesting salads. My favourite? The pasta delicacy of tagliolini lobster (£35 and worth every penny). Save space for the delicious desserts.

For a proper Bajan night out that won't break the bank, try Dis Ole House in St Philip. What a laugh! Live music, great food and courtyard dining in a former chattel house with a wonderfully relaxed atmosphere. See www.disolehouse.com.

All in all, Barbados still has a huge amount to offer – it is stunning, but just choose carefully where you stay and eat. Follow what I've said (and I'm sure you'll tell me if I got it wrong) but enjoy.

You will. It's a fabulous holiday treat.

Travel notes

Stay at The Crane Resort from £375 per room, per night in a Junior Suite on a room only basis. Rate includes VAT and service charge. To book, visit thecrane.com