

Central America and Caribbean

Caribbean holidays: 20 of the best

With so many holiday options in the Caribbean, Fred Mawer selects the best spots for beaches, food, history and hideaways.



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Many Caribbean aficionados reckon Anguilla has the best beaches in the region Photo: CORBIS

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By **Fred Mawer** 11:08AM GMT 17 Nov 2010

 Comments

Thinking of a **Caribbean** break but not sure where to go? It's not surprising. Within the archipelago there are some 30 countries, overseas departments, dependencies and territories – all very different from one another. Some are perfect for flopping on the beach, others more suited for exploring, partying or diving. And of the many hundreds of hotels across the region, some stand out for families, while others are romantic idylls, or great for getting off the beaten track.

Below, I have carefully picked out some of the best Caribbean holidays for various types of holidaymaker, and given options for both those with deep pockets and those with a more limited budget.

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Unless otherwise stated, **package prices are per person for a week in May** (which is low or shoulder season), staying in the cheapest type of room and including flights and transfers. Do compare prices from several tour operators before booking.

Best for beach bums

Splashing out

Many Caribbean aficionados reckon **Anguilla** has the best beaches in the region. I agree. This peculiar little British Overseas Territory is ringed with sublime, powdery white sands. If money were no object, I would check into **Cap Juluca**, where bedrooms come in the form of Moorish-style villas, strung out along the hotel's own hard-to-improve, mile-long beach. Booked through **Seasons**, £2,450 b&b. (01244 202 002, www.seasons.co.uk).

On a tighter budget

I recently spent a few days on the far eastern coast of the **Dominican Republic**, in the resort area of Punta Cana. There's not much to do there away from the hotels and beaches, but you may not regard that as a problem, as the beaches are gorgeous: long, with the softest sands, and backed in classic fashion by bendy palms. For safe swimming and watersports, stay down at the reef-protected southern end of the stretch of coast. **Dreams Palm Beach**, a high-quality and pretty civilised all-inclusive resort, is a good option for couples and families. Booked with **First Choice** (0871 200 7799, www.firstchoice.co.uk), £959.

Best for romantics

Splashing out

Hermitage Bay on **Antigua** fills all the lovey-dovey boxes. It's secluded, on its own stunning west-coast beach. The 25 bedrooms, occupying cottages in the hotel's extensive tropical gardens, are very private, and have four-poster beds and free-standing bathtubs. **Hillside Pool Suites** also come with their own private plunge pool (and wonderful views). And, except in July and August, no children under 12 are allowed. Booked through **ITC Classics**, £2,550 all-inclusive. (01244 355 570, www.itcclassics.co.uk).

On a tighter budget

I am struggling to think of a budget place to stay in the Caribbean that is more romantic than **La Sagesse**. This little hideaway hotel stands at one end of a perfect, long, palm-shaded beach in an isolated spot in southern **Grenada**; go for a wander along the golden sands and you might not meet a soul. Bedrooms – the best of which are feet away from the beach – are simple and offer few distractions from your partner, while the casual open-air bar and restaurant serves good fresh grilled fish. Booked through **Just Grenada**, £815 room only. (01373 814 214, www.justgrenada.co.uk)

Best for families

Splashing out

Most families holidaying in the Caribbean are going all-inclusive these days. One of the best family-oriented all-inclusive resorts is **Beaches Turks & Caicos**, on the spectacular 12-mile-long Grace Bay, on **Providenciales**. The excellent children's facilities include a pirate-themed water park, a DJ academy and a chill-out lounge for teenagers. Booked through **Kuoni**, for a family of four (children aged between two and 11) over May half-term, £6,370. (Beaches Negril, a similar set-up in Jamaica and also on a great beach, works out quite a bit cheaper). (01306 747 008, www.kuoni.co.uk)

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On a tighter budget

The four family-friendly all-inclusive **Almond Resorts** on **Barbados** and **St Lucia** are great options. The best of the bunch is the extremely spacious Almond Beach Village on Barbados, which has a mile of west-coast (and therefore calm water) beachfront, and lays on enthusiastically run children's clubs for everyone from babies to those aged up to 15. Booked with **Virgin Holidays**, for a family of four (children aged between two and 11) over May half-term, £4,784 all-inclusive. (0844 557 5825, www.virginholidays.co.uk)

Best for watersports fanatics

Splashing out

Thanks to spectacular wall dives, profuse marine life and first-rate diving schools, the **Cayman Islands** are widely regarded as offering the Caribbean's best diving. And the underwater attractions are about to get even better. The USS Kittiwake, a former submarine rescue ship, is due to be sunk just off Grand Cayman in early December to create an accessible and spectacular new habitat for marine life. Booked through **Barefoot Traveller**, a week, room only, at the highly regarded **Caribbean Club**, a condominium hotel made up of villas that overlooks the white sands of famous Seven Mile Beach, plus a five-day dive package with a top PADI centre, costs £2,295. (020 8741 4319, www.barefoot-traveller.com)

On a tighter budget

Sunsail lays on good-value flotilla sailing holidays (you travel around with a group of other yachts) in the **British Virgin Islands** and the **Grenadines**. With line-of-sight sailing, consistent winds and lots of sheltered anchorages, the BVI is the better option for novices. Late-departure offers before Christmas are available for as little as £789 per person for a week's sailing starting from Tortola, based on four sharing and including flights. May departures currently cost from £1,044 per person. (0844 463 6578, www.sunsail.co.uk)

Best for foodies

Splashing out

Though Anguilla and St Barts give it a good run for its money, **Barbados** is probably the best Caribbean island for gourmets. Wherever you stay, do so on a room only or b&b basis so you can eat out as much as you want in the many good restaurants. The food at **The Cliff** and **Sandy Lane**, the west-coast luxury hotel, is excellent (Michael Winner wouldn't keep coming back to the latter otherwise), and from May to October, Gourmet Indulgence packages are on offer that include wine tasting, hors d'oeuvres making, cocktail mixing and a cooking demonstration class – booked through **Caribtours**, £3,266 b&b. (020 7751 0660, www.caribtours.co.uk)

On a tighter budget

There are lots of great, affordable places to eat on **Barbados'** south coast. Popular with Bajans are Just Grillin', a share-a-table, open-air grill in Rockley, and the long-established 39 Steps Bistro and Wine Bar in Hastings for international/Caribbean dishes. On a Friday evening, head to the fish town of Oistins for its no-frills "fish fry" – a platter of fried or grilled fish and a beer from the stalls should cost you well under £10. Stay at Little Arches, a chic little hotel just outside Oistins with a well-regarded (though not cheap) Mediterranean/sushi restaurant on its rooftop called Café Luna – through **Caribtours**, £1,125 b&b. (020 7751 0660, www.caribtours.co.uk)

Best for partygoers

Splashing out

Follow in the footsteps of celebrities to the exclusive little Gallic outpost of **St Barts**. If you want to be in the thick of the action, stay at **Eden Rock**, a glamorous hotel that sits on a rocky outcrop separating the island's two liveliest beaches – booked through **Carrier**, £2,470, including some meals and car hire. Just along the sands lies Nikki Beach, a white-on-white beach club with DJs during the day and the promise of dancing on the tables at night. If you want more privacy, do as the A-listers do and rent a villa – Wimco has lots of fancy ones on its books. (0161 492 1354, www.carrier.co.uk)

On a tighter budget

Negril, in **Jamaica**, may no longer be a hippy hang-out, but it still has an engaging, laid-back vibe and lots of funky bars on its fantastic beach and on the rocks in the West End village. One of the best reasonably priced places to stay is the **Rockhouse**, an unusual, stylish hotel with many rooms perched on the rocks in thatched-roof cottages, two excellent restaurants, and steps and ladders down into the crystal-clear sea for swimming. Booked through **Caribtours**, £1,130 room only (though cottage accommodation will cost more). (020 7751 0660, www.caribtours.co.uk)

Best for culture vultures

Splashing out

St James's Club, a good four-star hotel on **Antigua**, is arranging new "reading weeks" next year with the publishers Penguin and Puffin. The playwright Damian Barr, the author Julia Llewellyn and a "bibliotherapist" will take part in the one for adults, from May 2-6 – booked through **Kuoni**, £1,438 all-inclusive. There are also children's storytelling weeks at the hotel over February and May half-terms, led by well-known illustrators – packages through Virgin Holidays (for the February week, £1,589 per adult and £825 per child aged between two and 11, all-inclusive, based on four sharing). (01306 747 008, www.kuoni.co.uk)

On a tighter budget

Consider a city break in **Havana**. You are never far from music and dancing in the city, but you might want to try to obtain tickets to see the outstanding Cuban National Ballet perform at the neo-baroque Gran Teatro, and to check out the latest salsa band in the Casa de la Musica in Miramar. Stay in Old Havana at the three-star art deco **Ambos Mundos**, where Hemingway wrote much of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Booked through **Captivating Cuba** – which can sometimes help out with ballet tickets – £810 b&b. (0844 412 9916, www.captivatingcuba.com)

Splashing out

The eastern end of **Jamaica** is one of the lushest parts of the Caribbean. Stay a few nights at **Strawberry Hill**, a chic and elegant Island Outpost property in an amazing position high up in the Blue Mountains, with guided tours of nearby coffee plantation estates and birdwatching on offer. Then head over to the other side of the mountains to its sister hotel, Geejam, a cool, luxury hideaway favoured by musicians (it has its own recording studio) in jungly grounds near Port Antonio. Booked through **Tropic Breeze**, £1,900, including all meals at Strawberry Hill, breakfast at Geejam. (01752 880 880, www.tropicbreeze.co.uk)

On a tighter budget

Mountainous, covered in dense rainforest, with tumbling waterfalls, a boiling lake and rare parrots in the tree canopies: **Dominica** is the Caribbean's nature island par excellence. **Mot Mot Travel** can arrange a week-long nature tour, staying at some of the best hotels and guesthouses and including a full itinerary of expert-guided hikes and boat trips, for about £1,400 b&b. (01327 830 918, www.motmottravel.com)

Best for spa lovers

Splashing out

Parrot Cay, a 1,000-acre private island in the **Turks and Caicos**, has a mile-long white-sand beach, exquisite, minimalist rooms and outstanding food. But its top selling point is the expansive **COMO Shambhala Retreat**. Often rated the best spa in the Caribbean, it offers a wide range of Asian-inspired treatments, and complimentary daily yoga classes in a pavilion overlooking the island's wetlands. Booked through **Elegant Resorts**, £3,360 for the Shambhala Experience package, which is full board and includes three one-hour spa treatments. (01244 897 991, www.elegantresorts.co.uk)

On a tighter budget

At **The BodyHoliday LeSPORT**, near **St Lucia**'s northern tip, even body treatments in the vast Moorish Wellness Centre are included in the all-inclusive rates. Well, to be precise, one 50-minute treatment each day is – along with various fitness and relaxation classes, such as daily yoga, Pilates and Tai Chi sessions. Booked through **Tropical Sky**, £1,679 in the second half of May, all-inclusive. The hotel is popular with solo travellers because it has good single bedrooms and offers communal dining options. (0845 543 2185, www.tropicalsky.co.uk)

Best for history buffs

Splashing out

Sleepy little **Nevis** was one of the West Indies' leading sugar cane producers in the 17th and 18th centuries, and there are plenty of visible reminders of its colonial heyday. Several plantation houses have been turned into atmospheric hotels. **Montpelier Plantation**, which feels like a tropical version of an English country house, is the best of the bunch. But Nisbet Plantation, once home to Fanny Nisbet, wife of Horatio Nelson, has the advantage of being on a beach. Booked through **Just St Kitts and Nevis**, a week split between the two hotels costs £1,950, including breakfast and dinners at Nisbet. (01373 814 210, www.juststkittsnevis.co.uk)

On a tighter budget

The tour operator **Explore** offers a range of small-group exploratory trips around **Cuba** that are intended to shed light on the country's fascinating heritage of Spanish colonialism, American imperialism and revolutionary socialism. The Cuba Libre! tour includes visits to Castro's mountain hideout in the Sierra Maestra, Che Guevara's Mausoleum, the Bay of Pigs and Trinidad, a little-changed colonial backwater – 14 nights from £1,499 b&b, including flights. (0845 013 1537, www.explore.co.uk)

Further information

The website www.caribbean.co.uk has links to the sites of all the Caribbean countries.