

# THE SUNDAYTIMES

4th December 2016  
Susan D'Arcy

TRAVEL  
6 / CARIBBEAN

## Dip a toe in the high life

Bob Marley meets the Maldives as the first over-water villas are opened in the Caribbean. They're seriously seductive, says Susan D'Arcy

In on the deck of my swanky over-water villa, above me is a cloudless sky, beneath me a Tiffany blue lagoon where turquoise play ya and a damselfish nibbles on an emerald-green anemone. So far, so Maldivian.

Except that I'm in the Caribbean, and, remarkably, given that we've spent the past 15 years flooding over-photos of hotel balconies on cliffs and across a mirror calm ocean, this is the first over-water accommodation in the region. Sixty-five number five in that the company raising the five-star status is Sandals. It has had a long head start in creating all-inclusive chain by challenging the top of the luxury market, and this innovation is a statement, loud and clear: it's arrived.

Its customers have come along, too. The villas, which opened last month in Montego Bay, are already sold out until July 2018. That's despite the fact that the cheapest week costs £10,475 – per person. What on earth does that sort of money buy you? It was the first UK journalist invited to Jamaica to see Sandals Royal Caribbean Resort & Private Island, Montego Bay, to give it its full name, has mock-Georgian architecture, manicured gardens and 222 rooms that run the gamut from colonial to contemporary. Some are lovely, others not to my taste, but I was here for those few glamorous villas. They're anchored by a boardwalk to Sandals Cay, a 27-acre dot of low-lying forest that's the main complex's home-white beaches. As I approached in a sleek electric boat, there is the glimmer of construction going on in the villas, and in building number down to meet demand. These smaller

hangovers will open in February and have some availability in 2017 – for now. If Bob Marley weren't playing in the background, I'd swear Villa 9991 was one of the trendier Maldivian islands. It winks the indoor-outdoor view to perfection, with floor-to-ceiling slide-back windows running its length to focus attention on the waves breaking on the nearby reef, then creaks a satisfying contrast to the tranquillity of the lagoon below. On my right, a haze of pea-green mangroves bookend the vista. Each villa is framed around a long that element: water, fire, earth, metal or wood. Mine had a breast above the boat. I'll have a turquoise stone gold pattern, blood and dark wood furniture and a kingfisher bird draped in white linen, with a 120 strip of glass floor at the foot. Beyond this is a large harbour with a freestanding bar from which to watch the sun set. A deck leads to his-and-hers rainfall showers on the deck.

**An idea with legs**  
The villas are already sold out until July 2018



disappointed this. Never mind, you only have the waves to watch. You can't get that kind of thing in the Maldives, but then you don't get authenticity either.

While there's some local life to experience on most Maldivian resort islands, here you have run-around Montego Bay, mainly Ocho Rios and rainforest falls on your doorstep. And while Indian Ocean service to beaches, it is usually recreational and remote. Here, D'Arcy and Christopher may have been treated by the Guild of Professional English Butlers, and while (obviously) the butler serves penguin suit, but they had an ease and charm that were distinctly Caribbean.

When D'Arcy's 11am tray of drinks looked impressive, I asked if they contained alcohol. "No... just a little peach schnapps... and some vodka. Come on, you're on holiday." One waitress suggested a side order of traditional dumplings, possibly the only food that makes a fancy Xmas.

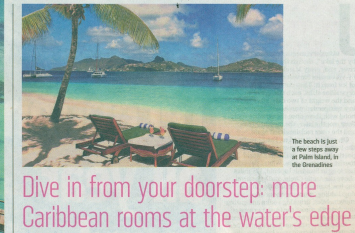
if your budget doesn't run to the Caribbean's first over-water villas, or your preference is likely to run out, you may prefer there's a more affordable option as close to the water that you can pretend.

**BERBUDA**  
Boris Philip and Annie Giff spent five years sailing around the Caribbean before settling in Montego Bay. So they sold their yacht and built Ocho Rios, a hotel's dream of simple chalets and hotel rooms that sit on a secluded beach where the Caribbean goes head to head with the Atlantic, producing impressive views just a few hundred yards from your hand-carved bed. The food is fantastic, but a word of warning: about the cocktails. Philip's rum punches, made with local five-Antique over-proof rum, are not to be missed. A week starts at £1,500pp, room only, including flights and transfers. 0843 708 8500; sandstrom.com

**BARBADOS**  
Even by the loose-linked standards of the Caribbean, Treasure Beach is laid-back, and its star resort, Hakk, offers an admirably eclectic interpretation of hospitality – particularly from a design perspective. The rooms and cottages have been designed by the hotel's owner and artist Jarryd Hancock, using "barbed coral", a locally sourced material that brightly coloured bottles into the glasswork. Some are perched right beside the Caribbean, which can get pretty wild here. As can Daugers Bar, most nights. A week starts at £1,500pp, room only, including flights and transfers. 0843 708 8500; sandstrom.com

**ANGUILLA**  
Where do you go in Barbados for a weekend away? Answer: the two-mile pink-trimmed strip of Shell Bay Beach on Anguilla, a stretch so beautiful that as soon as you book your first enjoy-reading villa, even your closest confidants will pretend you're Beach House is the only hotel in sight. Most of the sleek contemporary rooms have ocean views, the suites open onto the beach, and you can dine with the sand between your toes. A week starts at £1,600pp, room only, including flights and transfers. 02344 355570; kluwanrym.com

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The beach is just a few steps away or Palm Beach in the Bahamas

## Dive in from your doorstep: more Caribbean rooms at the water's edge

on giving here, so let the waters tell you to shoo, barling on your balconies will provide the perfect music to get. A week starts at £1,000pp, room only, including flights and transfers. 0203 553 7543; dpphotostudio.com

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WINTER IS HERE

The snow's been falling and our last-minute ski deals have begun. Grab your goggles - it's time.

Book your place on the piste at [crystalski.co.uk](http://crystalski.co.uk)

CRYSTAL SKI RESORT

While there's zero local life to experience on most Maldivian resort islands, here you have run-soaked Montego Bay on your doorstep

Dip into local life with a 120 strip of glass floor at the foot of the bed. The view from the balcony is the Caribbean.

Left: the Kermanshah Beach Resort in Anguilla; in the photo only, right, the view from a beachside balcony in Barbados