

# The Telegraph

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Caribbean

# 30

## Best Caribbean Holidays

*Whether you want family fun on the beach, an active adventure, or simply to indulge in some R&R, let **Fred Mawer** be your guide*

**I**'m just back from the Caribbean." It has an enviable ring to it – more so perhaps than any other holiday gloating. The likely presumption is that you will have been hanging out, rum punch by your sun lounger, on a palm-fringed, white-sand beach lapped by a bath-warm aquamarine sea – all of which is quite possible.

But though the Caribbean has enduring cachet as a tropical-sun getaway, over the past few years it has been losing ground in the popularity stakes to rival destinations. Increasing numbers of holidaymakers in search of long-haul sun and sand have instead been jetting off to places such as the

Maldives and Mauritius, where fancy new hotels have been opening with much more frequency than in the Caribbean, and to Mexico's Yucatan coast, which offers the same lovely warm sea as the Caribbean islands and more enticingly priced stays in all-inclusive hotels.

Yet the Caribbean has its own special appeal. Covering some 28 countries, overseas departments, dependencies and territories, the region offers far more than just flopping on the beach. For one thing, it is culturally diverse – much more so than the Indian Ocean holiday spots. As well as their indigenous culture, many islands have a

rich colonial heritage – British, Hispanic, French or Dutch depending on where you go. And on most islands, there's a wealth of stuff to see and do. On my most recent visit, I explored several impressive fortresses, snorkelled with turtles, zip-lined through the rainforest, watched a raucous carnival parade, and knocked back rum punches at a "jump up" (street party).

Moreover, the Caribbean provides an impressively varied choice of places to stay – much more so than, say, the Yucatan. As well as big all-inclusive hotels, you can hole up in luxurious private island resorts, historic plantation-style inns, hideaway b&bs and lavish villas.

When to go? The Caribbean is thought of primarily as a winter-sun destination – and it is driest and least humid from around December to April. But winter is peak season, with hotel (and villa) rates 20 per cent to 50 per cent higher than at other times of year, and as many as half a dozen cruise ships docking in popular ports on certain days, with their many thousands of passengers swamping beaches and sights.

So do consider going at other times of the year. My last trip was in August – and the weather was pretty good, with occasional heavy showers, but just a couple of rainy days over a fortnight. The region's official hurricane season runs from June to November, but big storms are very rare at the beginning and end of this period. Statistically, September, then October, are the stormiest months, though even then the chances of encountering anything disruptive are slim. May is a great month to visit: compared with the peak winter months, the islands are less busy, the weather often as good, and accommodation significantly cheaper. For similar reasons, early December is also a good time to travel – peak season normally kicks in around mid-December. Another important factor to consider next year is the cricket: England are playing three Test matches against the West Indies from mid-April to early May, and flights to, and accommodation in, the host islands of Antigua, Grenada and Barbados will be expensive then.

Going down the package route makes a lot of sense for most Caribbean holidays. As a general rule, packages usually work out cheaper than DIY

arrangements. You also get backup from your tour operator if things go awry (think hurricanes), and expertise in fixing a trip can be a big help. For example, a major selling point of the Caribbean is the possibility of a multi-island break. But in terms of inter-island flights, some island combinations work much better than others – good tour operators should advise. And before you book, they should also flag up whether your transatlantic flights are non-stop. Some Caribbean services, though called "direct", in fact involve a brief stopover at another island, adding an hour or two to the time on the plane – an example is British Airways' Gatwick-St Kitts flights, which go via Antigua.

When contacting tour operators, shop around for best deals. Leading Caribbean hotels appear in the portfolios of multiple operators: package prices vary considerably between companies, and it's rarely the case that hotel-generated deals (eg a free night) are exclusive to a particular operator.

Where you may well need to go down the DIY route is if you want to stay in an inexpensive small hotel, b&b or apartment. Many islands have lots of these types of places to stay, and some can be very appealing, but they do not appear in many of the operators' programmes. So look on island tourist board websites: follow the links from [caribbean.co.uk](http://caribbean.co.uk).

Here I've picked out 30 of the best Caribbean holidays, with options to suit different types of holidaymaker and most budgets. Unless otherwise stated, package prices given are per person for seven nights in early December (low season), based on two people sharing the cheapest accommodation, and including economy flights and transfers. Do contact other operators to compare prices. For direct bookings, rates given are for the accommodation only, per night for the cheapest double room.

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*The Caribbean has its own special appeal and offers more than just flopping on the beach*

## Best for... Culture

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In terms of their architecture, music, local cuisine and way of life, the islands have distinct cultural identities, in no small part influenced by their complex history of European colonisation and the African slave trade.

### Expensive

With its time-warped Spanish colonial cities and towns, rickety Fifties Cadillacs, fascinating revolutionary history, unique approach to communism, music and world-famous cigars, **Cuba** is by some distance the Caribbean's most culturally rewarding country – don't hole up in an all-inclusive hotel. Explore has a programme of small-group tours (by bus, bike and involving hiking) – the 15-day Classic Cuba costs from £2,075, including some meals – and can arrange tailor-made versions of the trips.

### Mid-range

Soak up British colonial history in sister islands **St Kitts and Nevis**. Booked through Kenwood Travel: £1,699 for four nights in St Kitts' Ottley's Plantation Inn ([ottleys.com](http://ottleys.com)), an 18th-century sugar plantation, then three nights full board at Nevis' Nisbet Plantation Beach Club ([nisbetplantation.com](http://nisbetplantation.com)), where Nelson's wife Fanny Nisbet once lived. Brimstone Hill Fortress, a Unesco site on St Kitts, is one of the Caribbean's most impressive colonial attractions.

Few British holidaymakers visit **Puerto Rico** other than for the day on a cruise. The US commonwealth deserves longer. As well as beaches and rainforest, it offers a fusion of American and Hispanic cultures, with elegant Spanish colonial buildings and fortresses in Old San Juan. Booked through Western & Oriental: £1,610 for a seven-night fly-drive staying in San Juan, Rincon and Ponce, including car hire.

Atmospheric Nelson's Dockyard

– a national park in **Antigua's** English Harbour – is the world's only continuously working Georgian dockyard. It includes a museum, marina, shops and hotels – The Admiral's Inn ([admiralsantigua.com](http://admiralsantigua.com); £150 room only) has attractive, quirky rooms (best are the Gunpowder Suites).

### Budget

In **Cuba's** capital Havana, immerse yourself in the partly faded, partly dazzlingly restored, glories of Old Havana; visit art galleries and see world-class ballet. Appreciate local life by staying in a *casa particular* (private home). Booked through Cuba Direct: £797 b&b in a *casa* with en-suite room in Old Havana.

## Best for... Relaxation

Not all beaches in the Caribbean deliver the Bounty Bar cliché. On Atlantic-facing coasts, the sea can be too rough for safe swimming, and hassle from vendors and less savoury types can be an issue on some islands. If your priorities are chilling on a beach and/or being pampered in a top-notch spa, then the following should fit the bill.

### Expensive

Parrot Cay by COMO ([comohotels.com/parrotcay](http://comohotels.com/parrotcay)), a 1,000-acre private island in the **Turks and Caicos**, is as good as it gets for both beach and spa. Guests have a mile of white sands to enjoy, while the award-winning COMO Shambhala Retreat offers Asian-inspired treatments, as well as complimentary yoga and Pilates classes. Booked through Bailey Robinson: £2,250 b&b.

Sugar Beach, A Viceroy Resort ([viceroyhotelsandresorts.com](http://viceroyhotelsandresorts.com)) sits in the cleavage of **St Lucia's** dramatic Pitons – as memorable a spot as anywhere in the Caribbean. Days can be happily spent gawping at the remarkable views from the beach

(imported white sand) or being pampered in the Rainforest Spa, whose treatment rooms are perched above the forest floor. Booked through Elegant Resorts: £2,025 room only.

### Mid-range

At The BodyHoliday ([thebodyholiday.com](http://thebodyholiday.com)) on **St Lucia**, an impressive amount is covered in the all-inclusive rates, including a treatment each day in the Moorish spa complex, yoga, Pilates and tai chi sessions, and lots of sports. With appealing single rooms and communal dining on offer, the hotel is popular with single travellers. Booked through Virgin Holidays: £2,079 all-inclusive.

**Anguilla** has arguably the Caribbean's best beaches: most have the softest and whitest sands you can imagine. Tour operators focus on holidays to the island's high-end hotels, but you can stay affordably. Consider Anacaona Boutique Hotel ([anacaonahotel.com](http://anacaonahotel.com); £123), which has beach service on the dazzling sands of Meads Bay.

### Budget

La Sagesse beach is a long crescent of golden sand at the back of a bay on **Grenada's** south coast. It's a little-visited spot: most beachgoers are guests at La Sagesse hotel ([lasagesse.com](http://lasagesse.com)), whose 12 modest rooms are feet away from a section of the beach. Booked through Just Grenada: £1,029 room only.

## Best for... Action

Diving, snorkelling, sailing, kayaking, windsurfing, kitesurfing... Many Caribbean islands offer thrills under and on the water. Bigger hotels usually offer watersports facilities, some included in their rates. On lush islands such as St Lucia, Grenada, St Vincent and Dominica, trekking in the rainforest, hikes, can be a wonderful experience.

## Expensive

Mountainous, covered in dense rainforest, with impressive waterfalls and a boiling lake, **Dominica** is known as the Caribbean's Nature Island. To get the best out of a visit, pack hiking boots and employ a guide. This year, KE Adventure Travel has introduced 10-day, small-group trekking holidays on the island, walking 4-8 hours a day: from £2,515 full board.

## Mid-range

The **Cayman Islands** provide the best diving in the Caribbean, and the waters off Little Cayman, which include the world-famous Bloody Bay Wall, a 6,000ft sheer drop, are deemed particularly special. Booked through Dive Worldwide: £1,995 for six nights half board at the Little Cayman Beach Resort, 10 dives and a stopover night on Grand Cayman.

The **British Virgin Islands** offer the Caribbean's best easy sailing, with line-of-sight navigation and short hops between the 60 islands. Sunsail has a sailing school in Tortola, and offers yacht charters and flotilla holidays in the BVIs: for a week's flotilla, £1,619 based on four sharing a yacht.

**Trinidad and Tobago** have the richest and most diverse birdlife in the Caribbean – more than 450 species have been recorded on the twin islands. Booked through MotMot Travel: £1,395 half board for three nights at Trinidad's Asa Wright Nature Centre (the region's most famous birdwatching spot), then four nights at Tobago's Blue Waters Inn, with an excursion to nearby Little Tobago seabird sanctuary.

## Budget

The **Dominican Republic's** laid-back and cosmopolitan watersports capital of Cabarete is arguably the best place in the Caribbean for windsurfing and kitesurfing. Booked through Sportif: £968 self-catering at beachfront La Punta Apartments, with a week's windsurf/kitesurf hire.

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# Best for... Romance

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The Caribbean has plenty of intimate, lovey-dovey boltholes, where rooms come with lots of privacy and are perhaps set in tropical grounds. Choose somewhere escapist – if your budget allows, it could be a hotel on its own little island – and, at the very least off, the beaten cruise-ship track, and you can look forward to hand-in-hand strolls along pristine, empty beaches.

## Expensive

Jungly south-western **St Lucia** excels in romantic hideaways. The most dramatically sited, and designed, is hilltop Jade Mountain (jademountain.com), whose vast “sanctuaries” (bedrooms) have astonishing views of the island's landmark Pitons through a “missing” fourth wall, and in most cases their own infinity plunge pool. Booked through ITC Luxury Travel: £3,665 b&b for a Star Sanctuary with private pool.

Escape to one of **St Vincent and the Grenadines'** private resorts, such as Petit St Vincent (petitstvincent.com). Its 115 acres are fringed with white-sand beaches, and from the 22 tech-free, secluded cottages, you summon staff, or ensure no disturbances, by means of a flag system. Booked through Carrier: £3,050 full board.

## Mid-range

Adults-only, hacienda-styled Little Arches (littlearches.com) attracts youngish couples who like a small-scale set-up – there are just 10 bedrooms – and want to partake in **Barbados'** everyday life. The beach across the road is a favourite with locals, and the centre

of Oistins, a fishing village famed for its fish fry weekly party, is a stroll away. There's an excellent restaurant on the rooftop terrace of the hotel. Booked through Caribtours: £1,265 b&b.

## Budget

**Jamaica** has lots of characterful, secluded getaways. One of the most affordable is rustic-chic Jakes (jakeshotel.com), in sleepy Treasure Beach on the south-west coast. The grounds are dotted with cottages: the cheapest are a steal, more expensive ones have gardens and roof terraces. Booked through Tropic Breeze: £1,099 room only (price for mid-November).

When I was last at Ti Kaye (tikaye.com) on **St Lucia's** west coast, I was virtually tripping over blissed-out honeymoon couples. Spread over a hillside are pretty cottages, with open-air garden showers, and terraces to take in the spectacular ocean views. Booked through Tropical Sky: £1,089 room only.

# Best for... Family

Big all-inclusive hotels with heaps of facilities and children's clubs are the most popular places to stay for families visiting the Caribbean. But renting a private villa – they often come with a housekeeper or chef to prepare meals – is also a great option: contact CV Villas (cvvillas.com), or search [homeaway.co.uk](http://homeaway.co.uk) for direct bookings. Or consider a villa or apartment within a hotel complex, giving you spacious accommodation and self-catering facilities, plus access to restaurants, sports facilities and children's clubs: tour operators such as Caribtours feature the best of these.

To minimise flying time, choose an island you can fly to direct (and ideally non-stop). In terms of when to go, if tied to the school holidays May half-term is ideal – the weather is usually good then, and flights can work out cheaper than during most other school holiday periods. If you want to go in the school summer holidays, fares generally fall in the second half of August.

Prices in this section are for a family of four (children aged 8 and 10) for a week sharing the cheapest type of suitable accommodation, unless otherwise stated over May half-term. If you can travel outside school holiday periods, prices may be significantly less.

## Expensive

One of the best full-on, family-oriented all-inclusives is **Beaches Turks & Caicos** (beachesresorts.co.uk). It is right on spectacular Grace Bay beach, and has a plethora of fun facilities including a pirate-themed water park and DJ academy. Booked through Kuoni: £8,885 all-inclusive in early August.

## Mid-range

With a fleet of sailing craft and a sailing school offering instruction to all ages and abilities, Nonsuch Bay (nonsuchbayresort.com), set on a reef-protected bay in **Antigua**, is a great choice for yachty families. Kitesurfing is a big draw too. You stay in family-friendly apartments and villas with fully equipped kitchens. Booked through Caribtours: £5,589 b&b in a two-bedroom apartment; the watersports cost extra.

**St Lucia's** Windjammer Landing (windjammer-landing.com) is an example of a best-of-both-worlds "villa hotel". The hilly complex has lots of villas and suites with kitchens, along with several good restaurants, a host of watersports and good children's club for four- to 12-year-olds. Booked through Trailfinders: £3,996 half board in a one-bedroom villa – a very good deal.

This summer, I stayed with my family at Beach View (beachviewbarbados.com), an all-apartment hotel on **Barbados'** west coast. Run by hands-on owners, the 36 apartments are spacious and practical (well-equipped kitchens, washing machines) and overlook a large pool area. Across the road lies Paynes Bay, one of the island's best beaches.

Booked through Virgin Holidays: £4,105 room only in a two-bedroom apartment.

## Budget

For a keenly priced all-inclusive holiday, a big **Dominican Republic** hotel is a sensible choice, as long as you select where you stay with care: not all are good quality. Dreams Palm Beach Punta Cana (dreamsresorts.com) is: expect a tranche of lovely beach, pretty good food in a wide choice of restaurants, and lively children's clubs for three- to 17-year-olds. Booked through First Choice Holidays: £4,332 all-inclusive – excellent value.

Best  
for...



## Indulgence

For a big choice of fancy restaurants, head to Barbados, St Barts or Anguilla. For partying, top choices are Jamaica and Havana – though a number of islands have weekly street parties with vendors selling cheap local dishes and potent cocktails, including Barbados (Oistins) and St Lucia (the liveliest at Gros Islet). Try to coincide with one of the islands' carnivals.

## Expensive

The jet-set French outpost of **St Barts** has a gourmet food scene dependent on most ingredients (fish being a notable exception) arriving by plane from the motherland. You can expect to dine very well in all the island's top hotels, including the stylish Eden Rock (edenrockhotel.com) – booked through Carrier: £2,645 b&b – on lively St Jean beach. Next door is Nikki Beach, an ultra-cool beach club/bar/restaurant.

The biggest and most bacchanalian carnival is in **Trinidad's** Port of Spain, culminating in 2015 on February 16 and 17. Booked through Geodysey: £3,400 b&b for a six-night carnival package, staying at an upper-range hotel, tickets for competitions, and transfers to and from parades.

## Mid-range

Several top **St Lucia** hotels have a strong food focus. In the north, Cap Maison (capmaison.com) has the best restaurant – the clifftop Cliff at Cap – and offers a weekly market tour followed by a cooking session. In the south, Boucan by Hotel Chocolat (thehotelchocolat.com), on a cocoa-growing estate, includes cocoa in virtually every dish, and lessons in making chocolate bars. Booked through Tropic Breeze: four nights at Cap Maison, three nights at Boucan by Hotel Chocolat, £1,649 b&b.

## Budget

Stay cheaply on **Barbados'** ritzy west coast – a good base on the beach in Hometown is Tropical Sunset Beach Apartment Hotel (tropicalsunsetbarbados.com; £105 room only). The most memorable, for setting and food, is The Cliff: three-course dinner £88 a head.

Negril is the best place in **Jamaica** for propping up a bar or two with a Red Stripe or two. Margaritaville on the fantastic beach and Rick's Cafe in the West End are full-on partying spots. Base yourself at the Rockhouse (rockhousehotel.com; £70 room only), whose restaurants serve excellent traditional and inventive Jamaican food.



### Travel essentials

- **Bailey Robinson**  
01488 689700  
baileyrobinson.com
- **Caribtours**  
020 7751 0660  
caribtours.co.uk
- **Carrier**  
0161 492 1354  
carrier.co.uk
- **Cuba Direct**  
020 7 148 3042  
cubadirect.co.uk
- **Dive Worldwide**  
0845 130 6980  
diveworldwide.com
- **Elegant Resorts**  
01244 897516  
elegantresorts.co.uk
- **Explore**  
0843 634 6040  
explore.co.uk
- **First Choice**

- 0844 871 1604  
firstchoice.co.uk
- **Geodyssey**  
020 7281 7788  
geodyssey.co.uk
- **ITC Luxury Travel**  
01244 355527  
itcluxurytravel.co.uk
- **Just Grenada**  
01373 814214  
justgrenada.co.uk
- **KE Adventure Travel**  
017687 73966  
keadventure.com
- **Kenwood Travel**  
020 7749 9220  
kenwoodtravel.co.uk
- **Kuoni**  
01306 747008  
kuoni.co.uk
- **Motmot Travel**  
01327 359622

- motmottravel.com
- **Sportif**  
01273 844919  
sportif.travel
- **Sunsail**  
0844 273 2177  
sunsail.co.uk
- **Traillfinders**  
020 7368 1200  
traillfinders.com
- **Tropical Sky**  
0843 249 5361  
tropicalskey.co.uk
- **Tropic Breeze**  
01752 880880  
tropicbreeze.co.uk
- **Virgin Holidays**  
0844 557 3859  
virginholidays.co.uk
- **Western & Oriental**  
020 7666 1234  
westernoriental.com



**Open-air bar Rick's Cafe in the Jamaican town of Negril is a full-on party spot**



**A good time for family holidays in the Caribbean is during the May half-term**





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**The affordable cottages at Jake's, in Treasure Beach, are right on the seafront**



**Windjammer Landing Villa Beach Resort  
in St Lucia offers something for all**



**Anguilla has arguably some of the  
Caribbean's best beaches**



Scuba dive in the Caribbean and witness the islands' colourful fish and corals