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TIME OUT

## The many faces of a Bajan paradise

MALAVIKA NATARAJ

Reggae bars, rum shops, pristine beaches, coral reefs and water sports — Barbados has a rich legacy in tourism.

PHOTOS: MALAVIKA NATARAJ



**ISLAND SPLENDOUR: One of the oldest windmills in the parish of St. Lucy.**

AS the plane circled over an emerald green patch set in deep blue water, the island drew closer. *Barbados*. It took us six months to plan this journey to the eastern-most Caribbean island, to find a suitable package that included flights and the hotel. Browsing through travel brochures and speaking to agents, we finally decided the most economical way was to book it on the Internet. One restless flight later, we were finally in a holiday-makers paradise.

After an hour's wait for our bags, we made our way into the island. Taxis are the best way to get from the airport to the capital city of Bridgetown, with the trip costing approximately 40 BBD (Barbados dollars). However, the price does vary depending on the destination. Travellers opting to rent cars — be warned! The local drivers race through narrow lanes and roads at breakneck speed, unmindful of all other traffic on the road.

Crickets chirped in the tall grasses by the roadside as we made our way to our hotel on the West Coast of Barbados, situated in the parish of St. James. The entire island is divided into a total of 11 "parishes", 10 of which are named after saints, re-instating the island's Anglican heritage. The heart of each parish is marked by a cathedral that is frequented by residents in the area.



**The Colony Club Hotel in St. James.**

As the car drew up to the tall, porticoed entrance at the Colony Club Hotel, we were welcomed with wide white smiles and tall glasses of the island's staple drink, Rum Punch. Addictive and highly potent, Barbadian rum is an inherent part of the Island's culture. Akin to Indian *dhabas* or teashops, rum shops have served as snack bars and common meeting places on the island for over three centuries. The Barbadians — or "Bajans" as they are locally called — were among the first in the world to make rum. On the island, it is produced from local sugarcane molasses or sugarcane juice. Barbados is also home to perhaps the oldest and best known brand of rum in the world, Mount Gay Rum, which dates all the way back to 1663. A majority of the rum produced on the island comes from the northernmost parish of St. Lucy, which is mainly agrarian. Plantations cultivating rice, sugarcane and bananas hug the hilly terrain of this region, while steep white cliffs hang over the sea.

For most tourists, however, the west, south and east coasts of the island hold the most promise.

### From coast to coast

Being the most expensive, the west coast attracts slightly older holidaymakers, intent on relaxation. On this coast is the famous Sandy Lane Hotel and many Hollywood stars — from Liz Hurley to Catherine Zeta Jones — have passed through its rooms.

The beaches in the west tend to be slightly grainier than those on the south coast, but just as beautiful. On the first morning, after breakfast at the hotel, we boarded a local bus to take us to Mullen's Beach. For those that don't mind a short walk to a bus stop, the local buses serve as a much cheaper travel option. Though reckless and bumpy, they play loud, cheerful Reggae music and cost only 1.50 BBD for a single trip. All along the journey, we could see the sparkling blue ocean. Several famous people have beachfront properties along this coast while others, like Tony Blair, are frequent visitors.

Mullen's Beach, highly recommended by our local friends, is easily one of the most scenic beaches on this coast. The sea glows a heartening blue-green, as is advertised in all the travel brochures and pictures. In the early hours of the morning, the beach is fairly deserted but as the sun climbs higher, families with children and colourful buckets arrive. Big, stripy umbrellas and stretch loungers can be hired from a shack on the beach that also rents canoes. From time to time, locals ride past on the waves, enticing swimmers to try their jet-skies-on-hire.



**Bridgetown against the sea.**

Water sports is naturally the biggest attraction for tourists visiting Barbados. With the coral surrounding the island accumulating to nearly 300 feet, it serves as a natural magnet for snorkelling and scuba diving enthusiasts alike. There are also glass-bottomed boats that will take swimmers out into the sea, to see the man-made shipwreck or to swim with the turtles. But if you are looking for pure adventure, head to Bathsheba, on the east coast of the island, where the waves are highest and the surfers are the most serious. The waters are choppy and there is very little swimming allowed. Diving and surfing are the most common sports here, and thick rubber wet-suits are a near necessity. The jagged rocks cutting through the water are enough to scare anyone off — but not the wave riders. This coast has hosted several international surfing competitions over the years.

Following the east coast downwards takes us to the southern part of the island. Famed for its sugary white beaches and blue waters, the parish of Christ Church has the most active nightlife in the country — and therefore attracts a much younger crowd. Hotels here are cheaper than in any other part of Barbados. The beaches on the south coast are often packed with sun-worshippers and volleyball addicts. "Beach boys" with dreadlocks and illegal drugs roam freely, tempting tourists to "try something tropical".

Although we steered clear of anything illicit, no holiday to Barbados is complete without a little bit of partying. Reggae bars interspersed with Irish-style pubs and eating joints are filled with locals and tourists alike. The busiest roads around the clubs are peppered with road-side carts serving hot food at rock-bottom prices. A delicious aroma surrounds the spicy sausages with onion relish and cheesy macaroni pies, tempting the passers-by.

### **A foodie's paradise**

Islanders are passionate about food and Barbados is no exception. Chicken is the most consumed meat in the country but *cuckoo* — a kind of cooked cornmeal dish — and flying fish are the national foods. Inspired by the immigrants from India *rotis* (spicy wraps filled with curried meat and vegetables) remain the most popular fast food. At restaurants, rum-based drinks sweetened with coconut cream delight the palate, while exotic fruits and banana fritters are a staple dessert. It is also said that the rich, warm scent of homemade sweet coconut bread can drive a Bajan man to kill for a piece!



**The northwest coast of Barbados.**

Whether it is an authentic Indian meal, local fast food, or island safaris, the island offers a range of activities to suit everyone's taste. Serious sightseers will enjoy day trips to the Barbados Wildlife Reserve while electric trams take tourists into Harrison's Cave — limestone caverns filled with beautiful waterfalls and streams. For those interested in witnessing the country's tradition in music and dance, the Bajan Roots and Rhythms show is the place to go. Although not cheap, viewers can eat the best of local cuisine to the undulating beat of drums while watching dancers in their bright costumes. Bridgetown and Holetown are both filled with shops selling colourful swimwear as well as touristy artefacts.

### **And, finally, cricket**

Sports fever sweeps the island as Barbados prepares for the onslaught of cricket fans arriving in April this year. With the government spending in excess of US\$ 100 million on renovations, full hope of recovering the costs lies with tourism. From March to April, Barbados hopes to attract thousands of cricket enthusiasts from all over the world to watch countries battle it out on the 3Ws Oval, venue of the preliminary matches. In addition to widening highways and roads to accommodate higher traffic volumes, over US\$ 67.5 million has already been spent on refurbishing the venue for the six final "Super Eight" matches — the world famous Kensington Oval. Additional seating and upgraded player facilities are only a few examples of newly added features. For the government, security issues surrounding the event are also far from being resolved.

But despite the challenges, nothing can dampen the excitement of hosting a global event of this magnitude. Islanders eagerly await the exodus and the local businessmen anticipate windfall profits. Tourists struggle to find accommodation and several visiting fans will be accommodated in over 14 cruise ships around the island.

On Saturday, April 28, over two billion global viewers will unanimously hold their breath to hear the final crack of the bat against the ball, spinning over the green of the Kensington Oval. For Barbados, with its vibrant spirit and culture, the Cricket World Cup 2007 is hopefully the continuation of a rich legacy in tourism.

### **Quickfacts**

\* There are no direct flights from India to Barbados and travellers are routed through London.

\* A return trip from Chennai to Bridgetown ranges from Rs.54,000 to Rs.1,00,000 (exclusive of Rs. 15,000 in taxes).

\* Tourists planning to visit during the World Cup can expect \$100 visa cost and weeks-long delay in application.

\* For further information and details on sites and attractions in Barbados, visit <http://www.barbados.org/> or [www.funbarbados.com/](http://www.funbarbados.com/)

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