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THE SUNDAY TIMES

The 21 hottest hideaways

Launching our Caribbean special, Chris Haslam picks the places to stay this winter

Chris Haslam Published: 4 October 2015



The outlook this winter is fine and dry, with light breezes and a chance of rum (Tanveer Badal)

sargassum seaweed that bloomed across the region this summer. Like you, we prefer our sand white and weed-free, so we've double-checked with every property listed here that its beach wasn't troubled by sargassum at the time of going to press. Thankfully, the stuff now appears to be on the wane across the region, so those with a clean bill of health should keep it.

Now dig out the factor 50. Whatever the calendar says, the hottest days of the year are still to come.

Unless stated, prices are per person for seven nights, B&B, including flights and transfers

Does winter's approach fill you with dread of cold days, thick jumpers and porridge for breakfast? Then you're getting it all wrong. You should be anticipating hot days, skimpy beachwear and rum for breakfast, for this is the season of the Caribbean break.

Admittedly, things haven't been universally paradisiacal in the Antilles this year. Some beaches have been blighted by the foul-smelling



Rainforest retreat, St Lucia

Out-of-the-box thinking predominates at the Ladera Resort, where the fourth wall has been left out of every suite. This leaves the seaward side open not only to the Caribbean breeze, but to the best views anywhere of the Pitons. Bear in mind, though, that you're in the rainforest, high above the ocean, so getting to the beach means taking a shuttle. The rooms, all of which have private plunge pools, are comfortable, rather than luxurious (No 6 has the best views), there's an infinity pool, and the poshest restaurant on the island, Dasheene, is on site. *From £2,271pp; 020 7112 0019, fleewinter.com*

Clifftop class, St Lucia

If luxury is more important than views, head north to the Cap Maison resort, a sugar plantation turned five-star hotel on the clifftop above Smugglers Cove. Elegant and English-owned, it has hacienda-style rooms, tropical gardens and a planter-style main house that's home to Theo's honesty bar. Take a posh frock — this is a dress-up-for-dinner joint with a foodie focus. The dreadlocked Welsh chef Craig Jones's offerings include caramelised scallops and wagyu rib. Cap Maison has a pool and a spa, and the beach, where you'll find the Naked Fisherman bar, is just five minutes down the lane. *From £1,619pp; 020 7751 0660, caribtours.co.uk*



Hotel Esencia, Mexico (Tanveer Badal)

Posh Punta Cana, Dominican Republic

The USP at Zoëtry Agua is Endless Privileges, which translates as posh all-inclusive, and includes Bulgari toiletries, fine wines, à la carte dining and champagne on ice in your room every night. The hotel is a palm-shaded enclave of quiet elegance at the end of gorgeous Sivory Beach, far from the banging resorts of Bavaro, but you can always gallop down to have a

look: a thrilling 45-minute horseback ride is part of the deal. *From £2,539pp, all-inclusive; 0800 188 4593, flightcentre.co.uk*

Join the club, Mexico

Hotel Esencia lies on the shores of Xpu Ha — pronounced “ish-pu-ha” — a shallow bay a few miles north of the hippie haven of Tulum. It’s owned by Kevin Wendle, the media mogul who developed The Simpsons and launched the careers of Will Smith and Johnny Depp. He’s spent 18 months doing the place up, positioning his Picassos and trying to decide where to place the Mouille lamps. The hotel has a vast, palapa-roofed organic spa, 600yd of bone-white sand and 29 rooms that exude minimalist chic. There’s sunrise yoga, a beach bar and a clubby feeling that seems to say: “If you’re here, you must be one of us.”

From £2,990pp; 0161 826 1591, carrier.co.uk

Jamaica Inn, Jamaica

Marilyn Monroe, Winston Churchill and Ian Fleming stayed at this Jamaican institution, along with an army of repeat guests who see no need to risk taking their holiday anywhere else. Built in 1950, the inn is loved for its location — on a private white-sand cove — its staff and its old-school attention to detail. Tea is taken at four, there are canapés and cocktails at seven, and dinner comes with fine wines. Peace, quiet and civilised conversation are the watchwords here, so if you’re looking for nightlife, you’re in the wrong place. The best of the suites are on the first floor, in the west wing.

From £1,550pp, room-only; 0161 826 1252, carrier.co.uk



All hands on deck: the pool terrace at Parrot Cay, Turks and Caicos

The BVIs get closer

The British Virgin Islands have always been a pain to reach for those without their own yacht — or, indeed, their own airline. That changes next month with the launch of Norwegian Air’s direct flight from Gatwick to Puerto Rico, putting Virgin Gorda a 45-minute flight and a 30-minute ferry ride from San Juan airport. Stay at Fischer’s Cove, a simple beachside hotel near the bars of Spanish Town. The rooms

are basic, but so is the price. If you’re looking for luxury, book a week at the Rosewood Little Dix Bay.

Fischer’s Cove from £807pp, room-only; 0843 289 3589, etcwwt.co.uk. Rosewood Little Dix Bay from £1,499pp; 01494 678400, turquoiseholidays.co.uk

Private Island, Grenadines

Haze Richardson and Doug Terman were the kind of people you might hope to meet on the other side of a rum bottle in some driftwood beach bar. After quitting the US air force in the 1950s, they spent years of adventure exploring the Caribbean. Doug later went home to become a thriller writer, but Haze stayed on, running the private-island resort of Petit St Vincent until his death in 2008. His desert-island ethos lives on: you’ll have no phone, no TV and no wi-fi in your otherwise luxurious stone cottage, and if you need something, you raise a flag. Island activities include yoga, kayaking, kitesurfing and sailing; the dining highlight is the charcoal-smoked, marinated pork ribs served at the weekly beach barbecue.

From £5,095pp, full-board; 020 3582 4990, originaltravel.co.uk

Go coconuts, Grenadines

If five grand is too much for a week on a private island, head three miles north to Palm Island— 135 acres of privacy, necklaced by white-sand beaches and dotted with 43 airy, tin-roofed rooms. With more than 2,000 coconut palms on the island — the founder was known as Johnny Coconut — there’s a lot of coconut on offer, from coconut pancakes and coconut cake to coconut shrimp and coconut cocktails. They’ll even teach you how to make a hat from coconut leaves. Beyond the nuts, the resort has fabulous snorkelling, a spa (which may use coconut-based products) and professional kitesurfing instruction from Jeremie Tronet.

From £2,492pp, all-inclusive; 020 7112 0019, fleewinter.com



Two for the price of one: serving up doubles at Petit St Vincent

Bengt's place, Grenadines
 Some say "be-queer", others say "bekwia", but the right way to pronounce the name of the hippest island in the Caribbean is "bek-way". Old-money Mustique lies to the south, new-money Canouan even further so, but there's a bit of a no-money vibe to sleepy Bequia, which remains one of the least developed islands in the Caribbean, or did until the Swedish entrepreneur Bengt Mortstedt

set out to build the kind of hotel he wanted to stay in. The result is Bequia Beach Hotel, one of the finest boutique establishments in the Caribbean — 60 rooms of laid-back retro chic in tropical gardens beside the beach at Friendship Bay.

From £1,299pp; 01494 678400, turquoiseholidays.co.uk

Parrot Cay, Turks and Caicos

Getting here has got significantly easier since British Airways expanded its service and brought the price of a return flight down to as little as £647. Base yourself at Parrot Cay, a private-island resort reached by speedboat from Providenciales. As at Branson's Necker Islands, in the BVIs, the vibe is Bali-meets-Marley, but it works. The cheapest beds are in the terrace rooms — simple but comfortable — and the resort offers free yoga, the Shambhala spa and acres of deserted white sand.

From £1,740pp; 020 3432 5703, scottdunn.com

The 'death in paradise' one, Guadeloupe

If you're a fan of Death in Paradise — the comedy crime drama in which detective Kris Marshall investigates a series of flimsy scripts that keep a production company on permanent vacation — you'll know Guadeloupe. This francophone archipelago is new to the tourism business, so lacks the luxury that has evolved elsewhere. This is no bad thing: the mountainous centre is largely uninhabited rainforest, while the beaches, particularly in the south, remain much as Columbus would have seen them in 1493. There's a splash of French chic in the port of Saint-François, but otherwise it's an open-and-shut case of empty beaches, Franco-Creole cuisine and superb rum. Begin your inquiries at La Créole Beach Hôtel & Spa, a 211-room resort with a pool, a beach and a very good bar.

From £1,005pp; 020 3588 6029, westernoriental.com

Villa for six, Barbados

If you're with Sartre on the whole "hell is other people" thing, then luxury hotels are not going to float your Caribbean boat. You'll need the seclusion of a private villa tucked away on its own beach, but close enough to civilisation that you can try to overcome your anthropophobia. Villa Milord ticks the boxes: it's a three-bedroom property on the sands at Fitts Village, north of Bridgetown, with maid service, an outdoor hot tub, a barbecue and a chef on call (at extra cost). The acclaimed Cliff and Cin Cin by the Sea restaurants are within walking distance.

From £949pp, based on six sharing; 01342 886941, tropicsky.co.uk

Barbuda bungalows

Despite lying just 39 miles north of Antigua, Barbuda has remained largely undiscovered by Caribbean sunseekers. That's likely to change in coming years, as Robert De Niro is turning the derelict K-Club — a former Lady Di favourite — into a £162m luxury hotel. In the meantime, there's Barbuda Belle, which opened this June with just six stilted bungalows on a 15-mile stretch of raw sand that it bullishly describes as "the most beautiful beach in the Caribbean". Reminiscent more of the kind of barefoot-luxury resort you find in Mozambique than the Caribbean, this is an eco-conscious outpost of varnished hardwoods, gourmet seafood



Peerless views of the Pitons from the Ladera Resort, on St Lucia

barbudabelle.com. Fly to Antigua with British Airways (from £562 return), then on to Barbuda with antigua-flights.com (from £60 return)

Keep busy in St Barts

If you like Philippe Starck-style minimalism, do not, under any circumstances, go to Le Guanahani. The biggest hotel in St Barts — with one beach facing a tranquil lagoon and another facing the open sea — is the hospitality industry's answer to the Hindu festival of Holi: an eruption of colour, from the turquoise and yellow of the cottages to the greens, purples and vibrant pinks of the tropical gardens and the shifting shades of the Caribbean. A £26m renovation has resulted in 67 refreshed rooms and suites described, predictably, as “vibrantly hued”. With the colour comes action: this is a busy hotel, offering activities ranging from kitesurfing and deep-sea fishing to hiking, moonlight kayaking and fitness classes. It has a Clarins spa and two posh restaurants, both of which offer better value than expected due to the fact that they're priced in euros.

From £3,025pp; 0161 491 7600, carrier.co.uk



Paddling pools: ocean kayaking in Antigua

and vintage rum.
From £2,065pp;
020 3695 2001,

Cocktail party, Barbados

The family-owned Sandpiper exists alongside its flashier St James neighbours as an oasis of discreet charm and impeccable style. Set in dense tropical gardens, the airy rooms smell of hibiscus, and the atmosphere around the pool is one of quiet elegance. That changes only on Wednesdays, when the managers, Wayne and Karen Capaldi, host their weekly poolside

cocktail party. The hotel will reopen on November 1 after renovations that include a new pool and seafront suites. Returning guests — and the Sandpiper has a lot of those — need not worry. Harold Shepherd, host of the hotel's eponymous beach bar, has not been renovated in the slightest.

From £2,075pp; 01244 897991, elegantresorts.co.uk

Simple pleasures, Tobago

Along the coast from Speyside, but jealously embraced by the arms of Batteaux Bay, the Blue Waters Inn is a simple, no-frills retreat on a long curve of shady sand. Popular with divers, who come to explore the Japanese Gardens and Blackjack Hole sites, the resort also caters to serial loafers who come to lie on the sands or by the pool, moving only to eat the resort's famous lobster bisque and shout up for another rum punch. If you're into birds, take your binoculars and a boat trip to Bird of Paradise island, a nature reserve across the bay from the hotel.

From £1,790pp; 01373 814234, www.justtobago.co.uk

By the big beach, Grenada

The de Savary empire stretches from Dartmoor to Darwin, but his best effort is the lovely Mount Cinnamon Resort and Beach Club, on Grenada's magnificent Grand Anse Beach. This is proper fly-and-flop territory, just 15 minutes from the airport, with everything you need for doing nothing — a beach bar that does cracking barbecues, a spa, a pool and huge rooms with flashy modern kitchens, should you have the absurd notion of cooking for yourself. If you must leave the resort, we can recommend the hike up Mount Qua Qua, in the Grand Etang National Park. Take the No 6 bus from St George's (£1.70 return), pay £1.30 to enter the park and allow three hours to get to the top and back along an extraordinarily verdant and easily climbed path. On this day at least, you'll have earned your rum ration.

From £1,169pp; 020 7749 9220, kenwoodtravel.co.uk



One hotel, two seas: Curtain Bluff, on Antigua's south coast

Caribbean classic, Antigua

The founder of the luxury all-inclusive Curtain Bluff was the Second World War fighter pilot Howard Hulford, who spotted the site from the air in 1959 and applied for permission to build a holiday home. The Antiguan government refused, so he built a hotel instead, recruiting his staff from the nearby village of Old Road. For many of the guests here, 65% of whom are

repeat visitors, Curtain Bluff is where the search for the perfect hotel has ended. It has two beaches — one washed by the Atlantic, the other by the Caribbean — a spa and three tennis pros. Coaching is extra, but all watersports are included in the price.

From £3,635pp, all-inclusive; 01244 897991, elegantresorts.co.uk

Sail round Cuba

It's a shame that G Adventures persists in calling its tour leaders CEOs — an affectation that stands for Chief Experience Officer — because it detracts from the quality of its tours. This eight-day cruise off the south coast of Cuba is a case in point. After a day in Havana, you set off from Cienfuegos aboard an 82ft catamaran to visit the Canarreos archipelago, some of the least explored real estate in the Caribbean, dropping anchor off uninhabited islands, swimming into virgin beaches and fishing for your supper. You'll get runs ashore at the populated Cayos Largo, Rico and del Rosario, and the opportunity to go croc-spotting on a river cruise.

From £1,149pp, including all meals and activities, but not flights; 0344 272 2060, gadventures.co.uk. Fly to Havana with Air Europa (from £599 return)

BVI Flotilla

If you've spent five days or sailed 100 miles as skipper of an ocean-going yacht, or you have the RYA Day Skipper certificate, then you can join a British Virgin Islands flotilla. Sailing here is as easy as it is beautiful: line-of-sight navigation, gentle yet consistent winds, exquisite beaches accessible only to boatmen, terrific nightlife and a lead crew just a radio call away for when you mess up. The itinerary takes in Tortola, Virgin Gorda, a sail-by of Necker Island and Cane Garden Bay.

From £453pp, based on six sharing, excluding flights; 020 3603 3683, sunsail.co.uk. Fly to San Juan, on Puerto Rico, with Norwegian (from £310 return), then on to Tortola with seaborneairlines.com (from £123 return)



Intensive relaxation at La Créole Beach Hôtel & Spa, Guadeloupe

Best for local gossip, Nevis

There is no hotel in the Caribbean like the Hermitage Plantation, an antique-packed wooden house on the Caribbean's prettiest island. The rooms are basic, the pool stops way short of infinity and it's not even on the beach, but at the base of Nevis Peak, set in dense tropical gardens overcast with clouds of butterflies. What makes it so special is neither the famous planter's punch, agreed by aficionados to be

the apotheosis of the concoction, nor the fabulous local cuisine, the highlight of which is pig night. The secret is the staff, who treat you like guests in their own homes and are more than happy to spend hours gossiping. If you need a beach, they can arrange that, too.

From £1,425pp; 01373 814210, justskitsnevis.co.uk

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