

BARBADOS

PHOTOS: BTA



BEYOND THE SUN

A favorite of the elite, Barbados offers stylish hotels, great food and cultural events to any discerning traveler. **By Carmen Moura**

“Did George Washington’s visit to Barbados help the American Revolution succeed?” So goes the intriguing question posted outside a house under renovation on top of Bush Hill, Barbados.

It turns out that America’s first President only ever left the United States to come here, accompanying a sick half brother who was advised to seek warmer climates as a cure for his tuberculosis. Washington was “perfectly ravished with the beautiful prospects which every side presented to (his) view - the fields of cane, corn, fruit trees in a delightful green.” He fell ill with smallpox, was scarred, but most importantly was given immunity from a disease which was later to sweep through the forces fighting for independence in his own country, leaving him unscathed to fulfill his great destiny.

Barbados was first named by the Portuguese after the indigenous bearded fig trees that they found there. It was, however, left literally alone until claimed on behalf of James I of England in 1625. Not long after, the colonists founded a House of Assembly, and Barbados became the third parliamentary democracy in the world, beginning a long tradition of stability.

Sugar cane from Brazil was introduced in 1637 and shaped the economy of the country till recently. Slave labor was imported for work on the plantations and sephardic Jews being driven out of Recife brought the expertise in cultivation; as a witness to Barbados’ tolerance in matters of worship, their synagogue survives along with the odd mosque against the lively Caribbean backdrop.

During the years of slavery, African culture was given different twists to fit into its new surroundings. “Slaves were forbidden from practicing on the drums,” says Ian Estwick, CEO of the National Cultural Foundation. “But they formed the tuk bands anyway and mimicked the drums of the British regiment.” Through such subterfuges slaves all over the Caribbean were able to keep playing a form of their own music, which eventually evolved into calypso.

Barbados also has the second most important carnival in the region after Trinidad and Tobago, called the Crop Over Festival. As the name indicates, this is a celebration which began in former times with the harvest of sugar cane, when the masters of the different plantations would give the slaves two days’ rest and extra rations of food and rum. The festival begins with the ceremonial delivery of the last canes and goes on for five weeks with the Cohobblopot, a huge carnival-like show with a stunning display of costumes, and calypsonians competing for prizes and titles. It all culminates with the Grand Kadooment, a parade representing different themes.

Through slave revolts, their emancipation in 1834, riots due to economic depression in 1937, and independence in 1966, Barbados remained a member of the Commonwealth with close ties to Britain. To this day, most of the tourists visiting the island are from the UK. Gentlemanly sports like cricket, horseracing, polo, the perfectly preserved interior of Anglican churches, the exterior of abbeys like St. Nicholas, in the north of the island, and a love for gardening are all remnants of its colonial past.

Yet the proximity of a powerful neighbor does not go unnoticed by the islanders. “We want to keep a close relationship with the United States,” says Prime Minister Owen Arthur, who has governed the country since 1994. “But always from the point of view of respect. We are a good ally to have, due to our stability and our geographical position. But the United States should be aware of the ties that bind us: seven million Americans can trace their roots to Barbados, and parts of the Carolinas were colonized by us.”

The Prime Minister has succeeded in making the most of what Barbados has: natural beauty, a prime location and an educated, skilled workforce. Under his sure touch the island of 260,000 souls has established itself as a world reference for the tourism market and financial services, and he is a firm believer that regional integration through the CSME (Caribbean Single Market and Economy) can only improve the economy. Minister of Industry and International Business Dale Marshall points out that Barbados will take that opportunity to keep specializing: “We’re not going for mass produced items, but for unique goods that establish Barbados as a brand name in the world, such as Mount Gay Rum, which we have been producing for over 300 years.”



SPORTS

ANYONE FOR CRICKET?

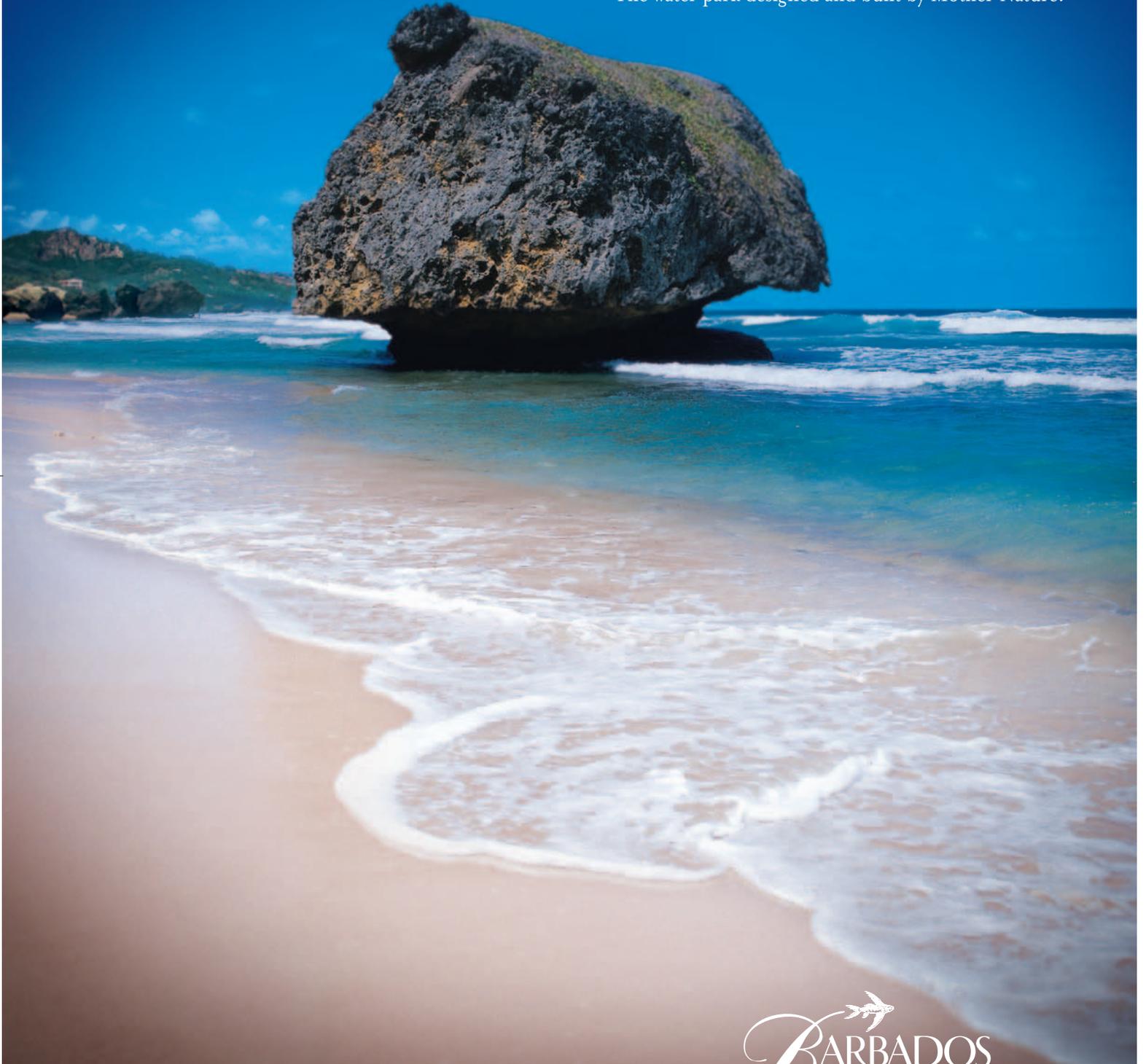
Cricket is followed with great passion by Bajans at Kensington Oval, and even more now that the island is to host six matches in the Super Eight Round and the finals of the 2007 ICC World Cup. This is a great opportunity to showcase Barbados’ ability to hold high profile events, as well as to increase vis-

itor inflow. It is estimated that accommodation in the island has to grow from 6,500 rooms to 13,000, and that the games could bring gross inflows to the tune of half a billion US\$ in ticket sales and ten years’ legacy spend. “And we will have a magnificently hosted World Cup,” promises Prime Minister

Owen Arthur, whose first love was cricket, not politics.

With names such as Sir Garfield Sobers, known as the world’s greatest all-rounder, it is to be expected that Barbados will do justice to its reputation for great flair in the game.

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Barbados was “discovered” a second time by the British jet set in the 1960’s when Member of Parliament Ronald Tree started Sandy Lane, an extreme luxury resort complete with golf course, for friends such as Sir Winston Churchill and Maria Callas. At that time the island was still a well-kept secret meant for the very wealthy few. Sandy Lane grew, other stylish hotels opened on the West Coast, word spread and more and more European jet-setters began to descend on Barbados to build splendid villas which they still enjoy or rent. The main industry stopped being sugar and became tourism instead. “Tourism created employment and was able to compete internationally without any subsidies whatsoever from government,” says Peter Odle, owner of four hotels and Deputy Chairman of the Barbados Tourism Authority (BTA). “The island changed, but I don’t think that people here feel overwhelmed by the tourism industry. They feel that they are a part of it, that they benefit from it.”

To live as a local is in fact to enjoy any beach in the island - none of them are private - especially Accra Beach on the south coast, which takes its unofficial name from the hotel that has been there for decades.

To discover Barbados is to fall in love: with its nature, with its culture, with its people.



Children go there during school holidays and keep coming back as adults. Meet a Barbadian (or, as they prefer to be called, Bajan) and you will soon be invited to dance at the Boat Yard or to eat at the fish market in Oistins on Fridays to the accompaniment of local music bands, or cruise the stretch known as St. Lawrence Gap which practically hosts an outdoor party on weekend nights.

FORTY PERCENT OF VISITORS coming to the island are returning, and it is easy to see why. Here you can enjoy long walks on pristine beaches, the underwater discovery of fish as colorful as gems and sleepy turtles that swim alongside you, or shop for diamonds in streets crowded with smiling people and watch sunsets while ordering crispy flying fish and cocou at a seaside restaurant like Champer’s. The more adventurous can go to the eastern part of the island, to the beaches of the Crane Hotel or to Bathsheba and take on the rougher Atlantic with their surfboards. “There is always something happening,” says Cicely Walcott, Executive Vice-President of the BTA. “No matter what time of the year you come.”

Strangely, only half of Barbados’ one million yearly visitors are actually staying on the island. The rest are cruise ship tourists who only see it briefly before continuing on their voyage. “People are looking for an experience and the only way to differentiate our product is by enhancing that experience through use of our culture, of who we are,” says Stuart Layne, President and CEO of the BTA. Minister of Tourism Noel Lynch, who has been successful at increasing the

overall time that tourists in transit spend on the island, agrees : “Everyone comes for the sun, the sea, the sand - and then they find out a little more. We have the natural attributes of the Caribbean with a history and a friendly, outgoing people. It’s the exotic and the familiar all at once.”

Bridgetown Port oversees the arrival of the half a million tourists who come off the cruise ships yearly. It has been voted Caribbean Port of the Year several times, 2004 included. “We’ve met all security requirements,” says David Jean-Marie, Acting CEO of Barbados Port Authority. “We are a very safe destination, and that is a key ingredient nowadays.” Kenneth Atherley, Divisional Manager for Corporate Development and Strategy adds : “We work very hard on a full set of services, also in the area of cargo.” The port is so efficient and receptive that it shares its technology and savvy with other ports in the Caribbean.

The state-of-the-art port can hold three mega vessels and 2 medium sized vessels. “We want to increase that capacity and expand into another cruise pier,” says Jean-Marie. “And the Cricket World Cup is the perfect opportunity. We expect that people coming to the island then will want to stay or come back.”

Established tour agents take care of passengers as soon as they arrive, transferring them into Bridgetown for a day of shopping, on to their chosen tours, to the beach and seafront restaurants or to the airport.

BAJANS ARE A DISCIPLINED WORKFORCE and that translates into different kinds of opportunities for the industry, such as business and conference tourism. The Hilton has opened its doors again after being completely rebuilt. The new hotel has close to 10,000 square feet of meeting space, with Needham’s Ballroom able to accommodate up to 570 guests. Together with Sherbourne Conference Center, the Hilton will be a major venue for the meetings and events market which is growing. The accessibility of the island, with frequent flights from the UK, Canada and the US, makes it a perfect place for this type of activity. “The beauty of this business is that you look at your peak and valleys and you try to fit the conferences in your slow periods,” says Jon Martineau, President of the Barbados Hotel and Tourism Association. “We can then give people planning conferences pretty good rates and extraordinary service.”

In fact Barbados epitomizes the “small is beautiful” adage and though it has often catered to an affluent crowd, the fun of it nowadays is to spot businessmen clad in Armani drinking Banks beer at a stall or newlyweds on a budget sipping champagne aboard a yacht. For all of them there is that walk through a garden teeming with bright, silent life at the end of the day, to arrive at the silver shore and know why this place is so often compared to paradise.

BARBADOS



Keeping the tourism industry healthy means maintaining the beauty of the island intact. And Darcy Boyce, CEO of Barbados Tourism Investment (BTI), is helping do just that. The BTI is responsible for the face lift along the busy St. Lawrence Gap, everything from façades to the quality of streets and lighting. It is doing the same in towns like Oistins, Speightstown and, most importantly, Bridgetown, through its urban rehabilitation program. "We are bringing activity back into urban areas, giving new life to buildings and planning ways to encourage people to go back into central Bridgetown at night and on weekends," says Boyce.

The BTI is also the arm of the government in charge of acting as liaison to any investor, foreign or domestic, who wants to take advantage of the possibilities under the Tourism Development Act, which has facilitated more

than \$ 400 million in investment since 2004. "We do anything from directing the investor to a financier or partner to putting our own resources (land, for example) as a contribution towards a joint venture," adds Boyce. Thus the BTI makes sure to find operators with the commercial expertise and capacity to put government assets to optimal use.

Investors may count on incentives, a legislation that enforces the fulfillment of contractual obligations, good infrastructure and a highly trainable workforce. The country is pulling all the stops so that tourism in Barbados is no longer seen as a seasonal industry: the weather is good all year round and cultural activities and sports should attract visitors at any time.

Most development, since the beginnings of Sandy Lane, has happened around the west coast, where the sea is calm; there is still room for development there, always respecting the island's aesthetic and environmental criteria. But the interior and the rougher Atlantic coast also present magnificent opportunities for spas, apartment complexes and new hotels. It only takes a little vision and all the help that's needed from the local authorities.

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Horsereading and polo: at the Garrison Savannah or the Barbados Turf Club.

Golf: try the vistas at Sandy Lane's par 72, 18-hole championship course or at Club Rockley and Barbados Golf Club.

WHAT TO READ:

History of Barbados, Hilary Beckles
In the Castle of My Skin, George Lamming

Black and Blues, Kamau Braithwaite
The Polished Hoe, Austin Clarke

FESTIVALS:

The Jazz Festival in January

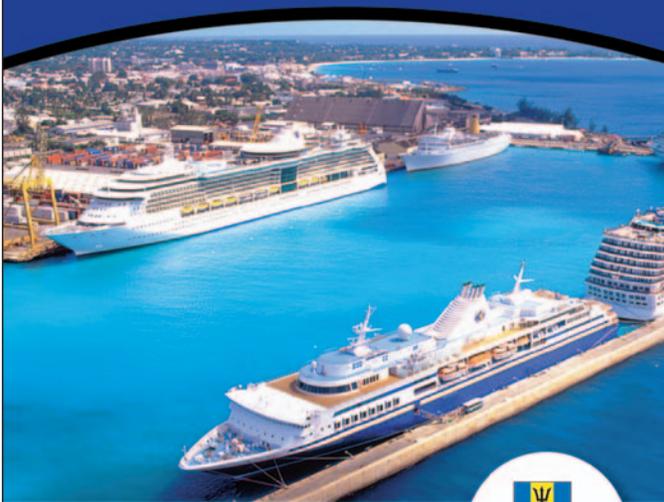
Gospelfest: Barbados' main gospel music festival

Crop Over: 5 weeks in summer

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- Encouraging investment in the tourism and hospitality sector

THROUGH PROPERTY MANAGEMENT:

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