

LITTLE BRITAIN

AFTERNOON TEAS, CRICKET AND
LONDON RESTAURANT OUTPOSTS,
BARBADOS FEELS LIKE A HOME FROM
HOME – WITH ADDED GLAMOUR

WORDS DAWN ALFORD



Barbados is a blissful destination for Brits – a marvellous mix of the familiar and the exotic. Cricket greens and Anglican churches in every village but with a balmy climate to die for. Add white beaches with clear azure sea, plus rainbow-hued hummingbirds and green monkeys in your hotel garden, and you are in paradise.

I am lucky enough to have visited many times, but this trip was a family affair. The cliché about making memories springs to mind. There were too many happy experiences to list.

We were lucky enough to stay in the *Ixora*, a handsome villa in the lush gardens of the Coral Reef Club. This otherworldly five-star resort has been run by the same family for more than half a century and really shows for the passion put into it.

Set on the west coast in a prime location just 30 minutes from the airport, the resort owes its stellar reputation to Brits Cynthia and Budge O'Hara. They arrived in Barbados in the 1950s; Budge was to be manager of a fledgling hotel on 12 acres of beachfront property. The couple turned the scrub-like land into gorgeous gardens, and arranged fresh flowers in every room. Personal touches like this are one of the many reasons that the Coral Reef has a high rate of repeat business. Once you have sampled this paradise, nowhere else seems comparable.

The resort is now run by the O'hara's

children and grandchildren, who insist on only the finest service. As we delightedly discovered, this is the jewel of the Caribbean crown.

Our villa had a large lounge complete with cable television, leading to a spacious patio and separate kitchen. Tastefully decorated, the wooden balustrading, fretwork and shuttered windows are typically Caribbean. The master bedroom's huge air-conditioned marble bathroom, luxurious bed and soft furnishings were sumptuous. And a second patio for a little privacy was the icing on the cake. The other three bedrooms were on the other side of the villa and my daughters adored them.

The large terrace, with comfy chaise longues, led out onto our own verdant private lawn and garden.

The grounds are so spacious that we had the luxury of feeling we had them to ourselves. A nearby full-sized swimming pool was practically ours alone and we spent many happy hours splashing around.

My youngest learned to swim independently in that nearby swimming pool and after completing a full width, celebrated with fresh fish and chips and a milkshake brought to her by the pool on a silver platter by one of the amazing team from room service. She declared it her "very best day ever" and it's a memory I know she will remember forever.

Barbados is fantastic for foodies and the Coral Reef's chefs are some of the best. The hotel has a superb restaurant with a ▶





A favourite pastime is snorkelling and the seas off the Coral Reef Club are sublime

► huge range of al fresco dining and a bar that whips up delicious tropical cocktails (and what we decided is probably the best rum punch on the island). We especially loved the beautiful breakfast spread in true Caribbean style, and became addicted to the fluffy banana pancakes with maple syrup and delicious local juices. In the evening executive chef Hance Bannister whips up masterpieces, taking Caribbean classics and giving them a twist. All were mouth-watering and we agreed the baked fillet of Mahi Mahi and meltingly good tuna carpaccio were unbeatable.

The resort's impeccably designed spa was a beautifully tranquil treat. The superior skincare brand Natura Bissé is a favourite and the body treatments make the most of fresh local resources. I felt like a new woman after the lemongrass and ginger massage. The spa features wellness retreats expertly tailored to guests and with a plethora of advice on how to continue after the holiday.

The only real problem we had was being spoilt for choice – for a small island, Barbados has so much to offer. We loved to wander along the shore and enjoyed the walk to Holetown and shopping at Chattell Village. The sheltered west coast – known as the Platinum Coast – is glorious for swimming and gentle sailing. We didn't go a day without a dip in the warm, clear water. Further east is where the sport becomes livelier with kayaking, surfing and kite-surfing. Boat trips out to swim with turtles are a no-brainer; these are magical. On dry land, the fun continues. Golfers are in their element with five PGA- standard courses. Hiking is a must as there are miles of undeveloped coastline and forest as well as go-karting and safaris, by jeep or Segway.

Horse fans are well catered for, whether riding or simply kicking back and watching the racing or polo. We were lucky enough to have visited on

Emancipation Day and spent it with what felt like the entire population of Barbados, at the horse races in Garrison Savannah. It was a party atmosphere with some of the most exhilarating racing we'd ever seen.

Possibly my favourite pastime is snorkelling – and the seas near Coral Reef Club are sublime. There are plenty of reefs in Barbados. You don't need an aqualung to see the gorgeous marine life. Whether snorkelling or taking a glass-bottomed boat, head for Folkestone Marine Park and Carlisle Bay where there are coral heads, and wrecks which will fascinate any youngster.

Barbados stages dozens of great sporting events every year. From May to December you can see local cricket matches played on pitches around the island, but the major competitions like the Test Series happen early, from January to May.

Shopping, whether upscale boutiques or authentic Bajan stores, is pure pleasure and Bridgetown is the island's retail therapy capital with Dacosta's Mall in the historic Colonnade building, and famous department store Cave Shepherd.

But one of the finest features of Barbados is its tradition of friendliness and courtesy. The Bajans are warm, sociable and dynamic people, always with a smile.

There is a heavenly scent on the island which you just don't seem to get anywhere else. A sweet blend of fragrant Frangipani and Bougainvillea mixed with a salty sea tang. If you could recreate this in a spray, you'd make a fortune.

But since we cannot yet buy Barbados in a bottle, we'll just have to keep taking those trips. ■

GET THERE

The award-winning Coral Reef 5 boutique hotel is recognised as one of the finest in Barbados. It has 88 rooms which include: Garden cottages for two adults starting at £399 per night, with patio or balcony. Superior junior suites with sitting areas start at £458 per night. Ixora and other luxury plantation suites are priced from £1,213 per night; Wellness retreats will be held on 27 July – August 3 and 9 – 16 November 2019; coralreefbarbados.com*

British Airways flies directly to Bridgetown, Barbados is just over eight hours. Flights operate daily, ba.com.



FACT FILE

For a small island, Barbados packs a powerful punch. Here are some fascinating facts about the Caribbean jewel:

- Celebrities who love the island include pop star Rihanna, who was born there in 1988, and golf legend Tiger Woods, who married on the island. Simon Cowell visits every year, and Wayne Rooney has a fabulous £5 million villa there.
- "Pride and industry" is the Barbadian national motto.
- Holetown – originally known as St James Town – was named after King James I of England.
- In Barbados it is considered good luck if a mongoose crosses your path.
- Grapefruit is a hybrid fruit invented in Barbados.
- Barbados has a literacy rate of 99.7%, ranking it third in the world.
- Barbados produces the world's oldest rum, Mount Gay, which dates back to 1703.
- The island gets 3,000 hours of sunshine each year, with April the hottest month and January the coolest.

