

# Global GETAWAY



*Sandy Lane*

Wondering where to vacation this winter? One warm weather destination that Canadians love is Barbados. What's the magic behind this small, 166-square mile island's appeal?

Barbados isn't the most beautiful island in the Caribbean, nor does it have the highest peaks, the best beaches or the most abundant local produce. Yet billionaires who could vacation anywhere in the world, come here year after year and folks with more modest incomes make this their once a year holiday trip.

The answer was obvious to me after a two week visit this September in which I stayed in five different hotels from the ultimate high end to the value priced all-inclusive. I travelled by local bus and by Rolls Royce and ate from high brow to street food. I experienced beautiful sunny days and the lashing rain and flooding of tropical storm Kirk. Even the island's politics had a measure of novelty and diversity.

On arrival I got into a political discussion with my driver from the airport and found out that on May 24th of this year the Barbados Labour Party (BLP) roused the incumbent Democratic Labour Party (DLP) government by winning all 30 seats in Parliament. With zero elected members, the DLP couldn't even form an official opposition without a constitutional amendment.

As a result of this election, Barbados has for the first time a female prime minister, Mia Mottley. During her campaign, some of her political opponents accused her of being a lesbian, hoping to stoke the ire of conservative voters. Good on Barbadians that they reacted in the opposite way and put Mottley in power. Barbadian pop star Rihanna posted on instagram at the time "...well deserved and about time! breaking barriers and making history in so many ways!!!!".

The issue at the heart of the election was economic. The country's economy is in a slump and following years of heavy borrowing, the government was saddled with huge debt. The sugar industry, once the chief money-maker for Barbados has diminished. Tourism, international business and foreign direct investment are now the main income sources.

At Sandy Lane those three economic drivers are most apparent. One of the most luxurious hotel resorts in the world it's jointly owned by five billionaires (men, all originally from Ireland) who keep the resort's top golf course, The Green Monkey, practically for themselves and friends. Resort guests can get



*Port Ferdinand*



# BARBADOS



tee times only between 8:30 and 9:30am and when I wanted to have my friend Anita join me, the resort put the price for her round at US\$1,000. (Need I say, I teed off alone with my caddy? We were the only two on the course the entire round.)

Sandy Lane is on the west coast of the island, dubbed the “platinum coast” because its vacation property values are the highest in the entire Caribbean. My room, a “dolphin suite” overlooking the Caribbean Sea and a coral sand beach, was spacious and luxurious – as it should be with low season rates at US\$2,400 a night.

This resort does have all the bells and whistles to attract the monied crowd. Their fabulous 47,000 sq-ft spa has lavish treatment rooms, hydrotherapy pools, saunas, a crystal cold room, a hair salon, fitness centre and more. It overlooks a huge swimming pool with a cascading waterfall. Nearby are the tennis courts, water sports at the beach and other activities.

You don’t have to stay at Sandy Lane to enjoy treatments at the spa, nor to golf at the resort’s second golf course The Country Club or its original nine holer, The Old Nine built in 1961. After a round I suggest lunch at The Country Club restaurant with its magnificent views across the fairways to the Caribbean Sea below. The menu at the Club is casual - crab cakes, cobb salads, fish and chips, chilled pea soup, shrimp tempura and the like – but generous in portion and excellently prepared.

My next hotel, the Fairmont Royal Pavilion, On the Beach had just undergone a multi-million dollar renovation which dramatically improved the hotel’s guest rooms. Also on the platinum coast, it was luxury at a much more affordable price. My room worked out to about US\$400 a night. It boasted the closest accommodation to the beach of any on the island. The lodging and location were dazzling, the food not so much.

That’s when Anita (who was staying at this hotel) and I discovered for US\$2.00 we could take a bus just about anywhere on the island and the coastal ones were frequent. We bussed to Holetown for a delightfully spicy meal at Sitar, an upscale Indian restaurant celebrating its 20th year of business.

Still on the west coast, my third hotel was a cheerful all-inclusive, Waves by Elegant Hotels. It was both beachside and street side (I could hear the traffic whenever I was in my room) with a modest spa and two pools. Rooms start at

around US\$400 a night but include all meals and drinks, water sports and some spa treatments. It was small, casual and fun with live music some nights, a good Asian restaurant called Shiso and a dine around program with its sister Elegant hotel properties on the island.

My fourth hotel change was to a Hilton on the action packed south coast. My accommodation here worked out to about \$275US a night. A hotel well geared for conferences, it nonetheless had a good pool, a welcoming sand beach and my room had a stunning view of the ocean. Its location convenient to Bridgetown, the island’s capital, made for easy visits to historic properties such as the George Washington House where I joined others in a “Dinner with George” in the very dining room where George dined for six weeks in 1751.

The meal, based on the fare of the past, was split pea and eddo (a local veggie) soup, dolphin (mahi-mahi) and yam pie, local black belly lamb stew with pearl barley and rum-doused bread and butter pudding.

My final stay was at Sandals Royal Barbados, an all-new, all-suite adult only resort in the spirited St. Lawrence Gap area. The daily all-inclusive rate here depends very much on the seasonal deals they offer, but this fall for example I could get a booking for two for \$700US per night. The Sandals



*Rihanna Drive*



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*The Cliffs Restaurant*

concept of “luxury included” escaped me though when included wines were at the base level – to get even a pinot noir I had to purchase a bottle – and it was hard to get a booking at the resort’s better restaurants.

On the plus side the property was most impressive and included Sandals first rooftop pool and bar and first 4-lane bowling alley. My room was large, modern and fully equipped with views to the ocean. There were six restaurants at Sandals Royal and another 11 at nearby Sandals where I could dine (though not all were open during my stay). There were five bars where I could get a great cocktail and the hotel arranged for us golfers to be taken by Rolls Royce to the airport.

In the two weeks on Barbados I found a little bit of everything. For fine dining The Cliff was magical, for street food the fish fry at Oistins Bay Gardens on weekends was delicious and cheap, and for local comfort food Naniki nature resort in the hills of St. Joseph delivered.

I played on world class golf courses at Sandy Lane and Apes Hill. I learned about the four top notch rum distilleries on the island and walked into some of the thousands of rum shops where a snack and a drink was a bargain. At Port Ferdinand I toured a luxurious condo development with 50 foot-plus yacht berths. Then I also saw a good part of the island on \$2 bus rides. And I discovered Rihanna Drive, a street renamed to honour place where the singer lived until 16.

As others have put it, “Barbados is the best compromise in the Caribbean”. While no place is perfect, this small island offers the happy balance of a little bit of everything for every taste. ◇◇◇

