



IT'S THE SEASON for the Caribbean

BY KENT LEWIS

“Caribbean” is the Arawak Indian phrase meaning “I ain’t committing to nothing,” which is perfect for someone with wings . . .

Most of your American compatriots can name only a half-dozen hangouts south of Miami. With 800 islands down there, such lack of familiarity seems odd at first, but can easily be blamed on the expense and hassle of flying commercially in a region where it is entirely possible to get stuck in an airport for 36 hours just 18 miles from one’s destination. Each day, thousands of Bermuda-shorted souvenir magnets get dropped on 10,000-foot runways not far from the least objectionable hotel they could book where they will contently settle in for a week of whatever experience befalls them. Usually, these folks are in for high-rise hotels, limbo lines and all-they-can-drink piña coladas.

IT'S THE SEASON FOR THE CARRIBEAN



Almost all Caribbean Islands offer the opportunity to let you play as hard as you'd like or rest as long as you need

But you (the few, the proud, the winged) have hundreds of volcanoes and atolls on which to hang your hammock. It doesn't take more money to find a hotel where you can step out onto the sand from your room rather than having to look down upon it from a room 12 stories above; it just takes an airplane.

Perhaps nowhere in the world are the advantages of owning your own aircraft more dramatic than they are among the islands of the Caribbean. For example, imagine that you're sitting on the pink sand of Barbuda's 14-mile beach (no, you've never seen a Barbuda T-shirt), having just finished the last page of your spy novel. With your toes buried in the sand, you look up and down the beach and don't see another soul; then, you look out at blue water and decide you've had enough solitude. You think, "I'm going to hop in my plane and touch down 20 minutes and \$20 later on one of four islands where I can pair a first-growth Bordeaux to my five-star dinner, and then I'm going to dance on tabletops with movie stars and ex-presidents." This is your Caribbean, captain, where days like this are simply a decision for someone like you.

If you weren't already aware, "Caribbean" is the Arawak Indian phrase meaning "I ain't committing to nothing," which is perfect for someone with wings sitting a half-mile away on a coral runway. Your only obligation, after waking up wherever and whenever feels good, is to ask yourself, "Just what Caribbean strikes my fancy today?" Waterfall or beach? Rum or beer? Cabana or yacht? Rice and beans or molecular gastronomy? Solitude or cell phone? JEEP® or sailboat? English, French, Spanish or Dutch?

SOLITUDE

You can find a little solitude on almost any island, but on most you have to work/drive/climb/hike to find it. There's no tranquility like that upon the "Out Islands" of the Bahamas, which start about an hour off the coast of Miami. True, this isn't the Caribbean, but it counts.

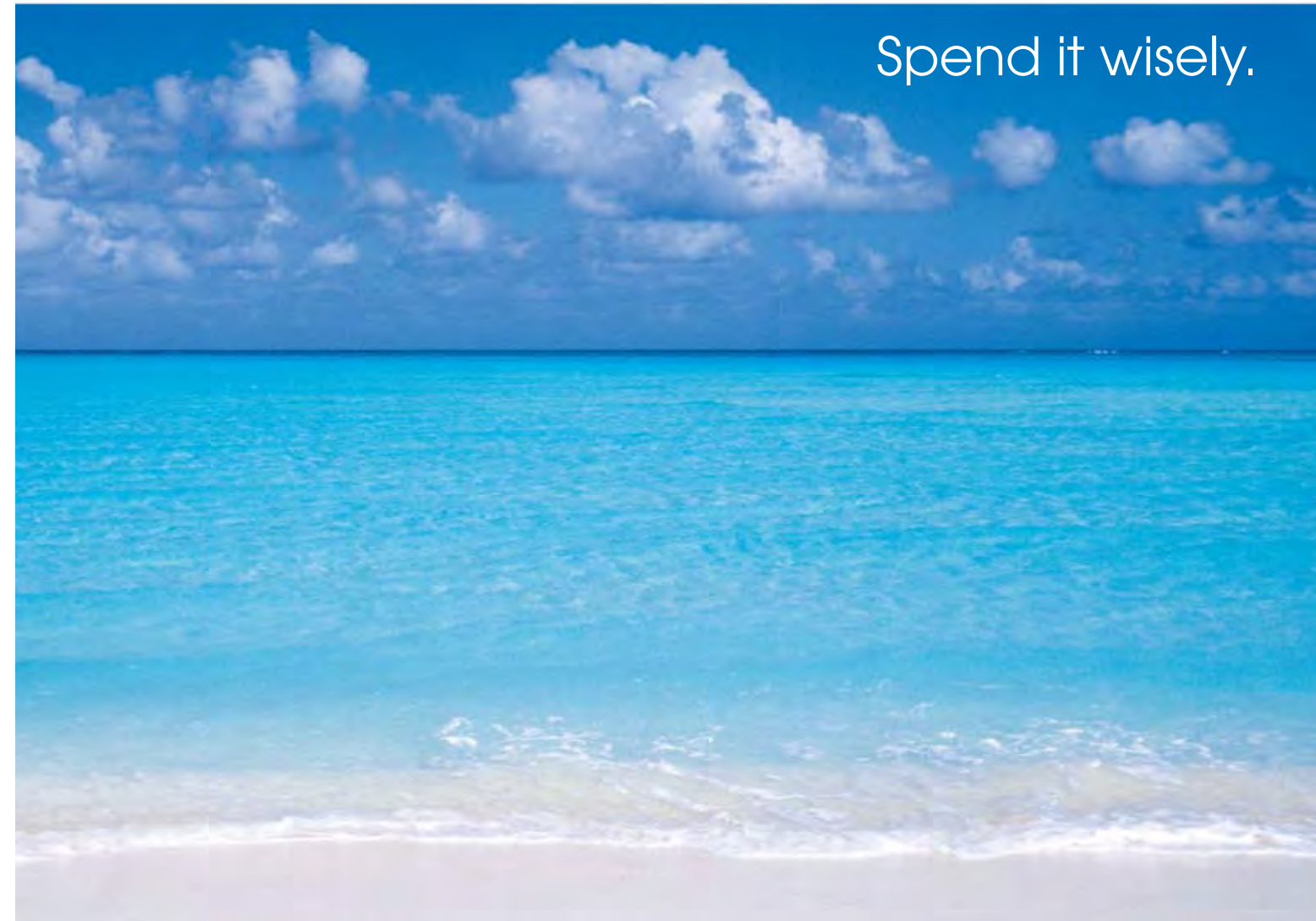
The fact that there are fly-in resorts in the Bahamas is incomparably cool. Hawk's Nest Resort on Cat Island and especially Pittstown Point Landings on Crooked Island will redefine everything you thought you wanted and needed from life. The island of Barbuda, sister island to Antigua, has a 14-mile-long beach that offers fewer than one tourist per mile; the sand is talcum-powder fine, and the pink hue will ingrain itself into the retina of your memory forever.

SPRING BREAK FOR GROWNUPS

"I want to party!" doesn't tell us enough to help you. We need details. If by "party" you mean "drink, dance, get stupid and wake up somewhere unfamiliar," then the Dutch have the market cornered: Aruba or the Dutch side of St. Martin. If you want to "eat well, drink well and watch rock stars party like rock stars," then Harbor Island (off the coast of Eleuthera in the Bahamas), St. Barthelemy (St. Barts) or the island of Mustique (one of the Grenadines off the coast of St. Vincent) is your place. If you're looking for Ms. Right (or Ms. Right Now) and uttering the invitation, "Hey, you in the bikini, I've, um, flown my own plane here and was wondering if you'd like to go sightseeing," is inexplicably not working for you, then try your luck at a Club Med in the Turks and Caicos, the Bahamas or Martinique as those facilities are marketed to singles. Lastly, if you want to party like a Carib, then what you seek is Carnival, a weeklong rum-fest. Regardless of the island, this is your chance to dance half-naked through the streets alongside sweaty locals and flamboyantly costumed performers. There are two rules at Carnival, however. Rule One: Everyone dancing in the streets must commit by 7 p.m. each night to waking up alone in some public park the following afternoon with some what-the-hell-is-this garment on your head. Rule Two: No matter how bad the headache is underneath that unidentifiable headband, you are obliged to wake up, have a cocktail with your late-afternoon breakfast and start dancing in the streets again by 7 p.m. Every island south of Cuba has its own timeframe for

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SPOTLIGHT ON Curacao

The newest resort on the largest island in the Dutch Antilles is surely one of its best. Baoase Luxury Resort opened barely a year ago, and it's already on the lips of many Caribbean travelers, especially those enlightened about the possibilities awaiting in Curaçao. Three hundred meters of pristine, private beachfront complement eight distinct villas and three opulent suites that fuse artistic Asian design elements with a familiar, comfortable Dutch urban style.

The temperature on Curaçao averages 81 degrees, softened by trade winds from both the

east and west, and the island is void of sunshine only a few days each year. Not surprisingly, guests at Baoase find few reasons to stay inside. The resort offers world-class snorkeling off its private beach and quick access to a variety of great scuba-diving locales around the island. There's also a nearby submarine that takes visitors even deeper into the clear blue Caribbean waters. In fact, every imaginable waterfront activity is championed at the resort.

If you do need a break, the rooms at Baoase are spectacular. All villas offer indoor and outdoor audio systems, flat-screens, DVD

players, Dolby surround-sound systems and fully equipped kitchens. Each room looks out onto the sea, beach, infinity pool and tropical gardens. There's also free Wi-Fi connectivity, and you can arrange for your own private butler and chef.

Curaçao is a destination in and of itself. Add the richness of the Baoase Luxury Resort, and you have some memories in the making.

For more, visit Baoase.com or call 888.409.3506. Arrivals: Curaçao International Airport (CAP).



Carnival, and while Rio gets the press, even the Brazilians admit that the island of Trinidad does it bigger and better.

CULTURE

There is a taste of Holland available on Curacao and on Saba (YouTube "Saba Airport" to see landings on the 800-foot runway with sheer cliffs on three sides), but for the most part, the Dutch are too busy satisfying American consumerism to worry about keeping up appearances. The French, the Puerto Ricans and the Dominicans have much to offer anyone who wants to hang out, observe, learn a language and try to take a couple of "made-friends-of-locals" stories home. You can honestly spend a month on the French islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Marie Galante and never come across an English-speaking tourist (bring a translation book because even trying to order lunch in English takes longer than a chocolate soufflé). The Dominican Republic is heaven, albeit the picturesque Punta Cana recently has become a cross between the Las Vegas Strip and Cancun. If you rent a car and wander into any town or village, you will find the kindest and most welcoming people providing delectable fare at prices so cheap you'll feel guilty paying the paltry bill. Lastly, the Puerto Ricans believe strongly in Puerto Rico, and if you get outside the 30 DME mark of SJU, you'll find yourself in a vacation that is more about them than about you. Puerto Rico is one of the most underrated islands in the Caribbean.

ECOTOURISM

From north to south, start your flying from Miami over the Exuma chain in the Bahamas. With the deepest waters in the Pacific to port and



The islands of the Caribbean have a number of cultural opportunities that are an exciting departure from what you may be used to. Kids and adults can easily enjoy them together.

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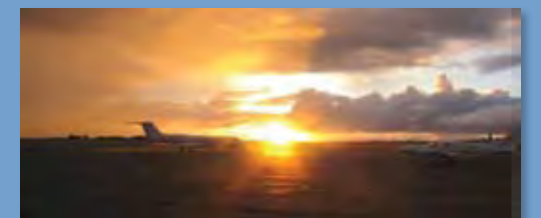
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the shallowest to starboard, the confluence of the two is perhaps the most beautiful natural sight in the western hemisphere. Great Inagua Islands in the Bahamas is a great place to fill your tanks (call ahead for fuel availability) and is a salty wasteland that is “home” to the largest flamingo reserve in the world. Get into the Dominican Republic, where you can hike one of the three true tropical rain forests north of the Amazon. Hop back in your plane and point it southeast toward Montserrat, where you can explore an active volcano that has been erupting for more than a decade. From there, overfly Antigua, landing in Guadeloupe, where you’ll plunge into waterfall after waterfall by day and scuba dive at the Jacques Cousteau Underwater Refuge in the darkness of night. The next island south is Dominica, not to be confused with the Dominican Republic. Dominica is a rugged, volcanic, beach-less, tourist-less island also known for some of the best hiking in the islands (and where Disney shot Pirates of the Caribbean). From there, travel down to the Grenadines for a day or

two of nothingness in the most beautiful nothingness you’ll ever find. Last stop? Hit the island furthest south in the chain, Grenada, where you can buy a banana bunch and head into the hills — not to return until you’ve made friends of a dozen wild monkeys climbing through the trees.

JUST KEEP 'EM COMING

If your preconception of an island-hopping vacation is flying from one watering hole to the next, then rest assured that we’ve done our research firsthand. If this is your dream, then your itinerary is set (north to south): Hawk’s Nest, Cat Island, Bahamas; Pittstown Point Landings, Crooked Island, Bahamas; Calico Jack’s, Providenciales, Turks and Caicos; anywhere, north coast of the Dominican Republic; El San Juan Hotel, San Juan, Puerto Rico; Romano’s, St. Thomas USVI; Leverick Bay and/or Bitter End Yacht Club, Virgin Gorda, BVI; Foxy’s, Jost Van Dyke, BVI; Eden Rock Hotel, St. Barts; Hotel Isle de France, St. Barts; Friar’s Bay (time your arrival for a full moon), French



The Caribbean comprises more than 7,000 islands, islets, reefs, and cays. These islands, called the West Indies, because when Christopher Columbus landed here in 1492 he believed that he had reached the Indies (in Asia). Not surprisingly, the islands offer flora and fauna not found on the United States mainland.



St. Martin; Mango’s, Anguilla; Coconut Grove, Nevis; Shirley Heights Lookout, Antigua; Abracadabra, Antigua; Ladera and/or Jalousie Plantation, St. Lucia; Firefly Hotel, Bequia (“beck-way”), Grenadines; Basil’s Bar, Mustique, Grenadines; and, lastly, Aquarium Restaurant, Grenada.


THE FAMILY BEACH TRIP

You’ll find nice beaches on every island except Dominica (not to be confused with the Dominican Republic, which has spectacular beaches), but the trick to a family beach vacation is to find a place the kids think is fun without it being completely void of taste and adult pastimes. Our recommendations for best islands/resorts for the family are: any of the all-inclusive resorts in Negril or Montego Bay, Jamaica; any of the resorts in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic; Casa de Campo, Dominican Republic; anything along Seven Mile Beach, Grand Cayman; Grand Case Beach Club, French St. Martin; anywhere in St. Barts; Malliouhana Resort, Anguilla; Curtain Bluff Resort, Antigua; Cotton House,

Mustique; Maca Bana Villas, Grenada; and anywhere on Margarita Island, Venezuela.

THE ROMANTIC BEACH TRIP

Quiet, inspired, scenic and sensual. There are a thousand resorts that would do the trick, but following our “infallible dozen” recommendations offers an inexplicable sense of place that no relationship could ever forget, let alone take for granted. Here is your list of where to fall in love (or fall in love again): Pink Sands, Harbour Island, Bahamas; CuisinArt Resort & Spa, Anguilla; Eden Rock Hotel, St. Barts; Montpelier Plantation, Nevis; Curtain Bluff, Antigua; Jumby Bay, Antigua; Coco Point Lodge, Barbuda; Jalousie Plantation, St. Lucia; Firefly Boutique Hotel, Mustique; Cotton House, Mustique; Raffles Resort, Canouan; Baoase Luxury Resort, Curacao and Maca Bana Villas, Grenada.

So go ahead, take the plunge! Pick your Caribbean destination and point your nose south. The great thing about taking your own airplane is that if you don’t like where you end up, you can always fly to another island. Now that’s a Flying Adventure! 



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