

Barbados: a cruiser's guide

Sara Macefield

Sara Macefield offers a complete cruiser's guide to Barbados, from arrival in port, to choosing the best places to see, excursions, restaurants and shops.



Barbados, with its blend of white sand beaches, plush hotels and sophisticated restaurants, is the traditional tropical retreat for well-heeled travellers escaping the European winter. In recent years, it has also become popular in summer and is a perennial favourite among movie stars and Premiership footballers – as well as former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who has holidayed here with his family.

The west coast, known appropriately as the Platinum Coast, is where you'll find expensive, swanky hotels such as Sandy Lane, while the

untamed east coast, on the Atlantic side of the island, is a rugged stretch of coastline famous for its rolling waves and unspoilt beaches.

The south coast is home to some of the island's best beaches and the liveliest atmosphere, with St Lawrence Gap's bars, cafés and shops at the centre of the action.

Barbados's capital, Bridgetown, is a lively, cosmopolitan hub with some of the best shopping of any Caribbean island – but don't expect a Caribbean alternative to Oxford Street or Fifth Avenue.

It is also worth exploring the pretty countryside, dotted with old plantation houses, traditional churches and cricket pitches, or grabbing your golf clubs and heading for the island's four highly-rated courses. For the more active, there is an excellent choice of water sports, as well as hiking or cycling in the interior.

Arrival

Barbados has a modern, spacious cruise terminal which opened at Barbados Port in 1994. It houses more than 20 duty-free shops, craft stalls, a post office, communications centre with internet links and a Barbados Tourism Authority information office where you can find details of tours, taxis and bus services.



The two restaurants at the port are Coconuts and Millie's Snack Bar. The former is the more formal of the two, where the average meal is about £6.50, while at Millie's lunch costs about £4.

A few minutes' walk from the main building is the Pelican Village Craft Centre, made up of stalls built in the style of traditional Bajan chattel houses and said to be the largest arts and crafts centre in the Caribbean. It houses 25 shops, a gallery, and a small cafe.

The cruise terminal is one mile from Bridgetown – about a 20-minute walk. Alternatively, there are plenty of taxis and the fare into the capital is around £1.

Due to security reasons, local tour companies are not allowed to hawk for business at the terminal and are only allowed in to pick up customers who have pre-booked tours. Independently-minded passengers wanting to arrange their own tours – as opposed to ship excursions – need to make arrangements in advance.

What to see/excursions

Bridgetown is worth visiting for a morning to browse in the shops and stop for a coffee by the waterfront to watch the boats sailing by. However, there isn't really much else to hold visitors' attention for long - Barbados's main attractions lie outside its capital.

The best way to get a feel for the island is through an island tour, preferably in a Jeep or a 4x4 vehicle. This allows tourists to see the luxury villas and hotels of the Platinum Coast, before cutting inland to drive through pretty villages and admire the old churches and undulating countryside of the hilly Scotland region.

Cherry Tree Hill, at 850ft above sea level, offers fabulous views of Scotland and the untamed east coast. From here it is easy to explore the relatively untouched region and watch the Atlantic rollers crash on to the sands.

One of the more famous parts of this coastline is Bathsbeba, with its huge boulders and shallow inshore pools that are perfect for bathing in – unlike the rest of this coastline with its dangerous rip tides and currents.

Once past Bathsheba, tours usually continue on to the south coast, the liveliest part of the island with buzzing hubs such as St Lawrence Gap and familiar-sounding places such as Hastings, Brighton and Worthing. There's also the fishing village of Oistins, famed for its weekly Friday fish fry-ups.

Island Safari (001 246 429 5377, www.islandsafari.bb) offers a range of island tours including a half-day 4x4 Discovery Tour for £23.

1. Beaches

In this part of the world, it would be a crime not to experience one of the island's stunning beaches. Brandon and Brighton beaches are closest to the cruise terminal at just a half a mile away, while the three-mile-long Carlisle Bay Beach is three miles away. Here, sunbathers can use the facilities of the Bayshore Complex, The Boatyard or the Carlisle Bay Centre.

Alternatively, take a taxi to one of the beaches on the west coast such as Sandy Lane, Holetown, Mullins and Heywoods. The journey costs about £6 and takes about 20 minutes, and, if you're lucky, you may find yourself swimming with the tame turtles that frequent these waters.

Just remember – topless sunbathing is illegal. Outdoors Barbados (www.outdoorsbarbados.com) offers a glass-bottom boat and snorkel trip, giving visitors the chance to splash around with turtles, from £24.

2. Barbados Concorde Experience

Here's a chance to relive the supersonic age when Concorde ruled the skies and regularly flew the rich and famous to Barbados. British Airways Concorde G-BOAE or Alpha Echo is the centrepiece of the Barbados Concorde Experience, which opened last year, at the island's Grantley Adams International Airport.

The \$3.5 million (£1.75m) attraction enables visitors to explore the aircraft and visit the cockpit, while an interactive multi-media presentation re-creates the sound of Concorde taking off and breaking the sound barrier. Grantley Adams International Airport 001 246 253 6257 www.barbadosconcorde.com £10

3. Atlantis Adventures submarine tour

This is a good way to explore Barbados's underwater attractions without getting wet. Passengers are taken by motor launch to an offshore site, where the submarine is based, for a 40-minute underwater trip offering a fish's eye view of the seabed.

The sub dives to 150ft, with views over the coral reefs from the large portholes, and an accompanying commentary given by the sub's co-pilot. It's a great way for water-shy visitors to get up close to shoals of colourful fish, turtles and even the odd diver, and there's also a chance to see the watery grave of one of the many shipwrecks in these parts. The entire trip takes 2hrs 20mins.

The Shallow Draught Bridgetown 001 246 436 8929 www.atlantisadventures.com £45

4. Harrison's Cave

One of Barbados's best known natural attractions, Harrison's Cave is a huge, crystallised limestone cavern full of stalactites and stalagmites. It was only fully explored in the 1970s, and opened to the public in 1981.

Today, visitors are transported through the chambers by tram, while a guide points out the beautifully-lit rock pools and caverns. A new interpretation centre, restaurant and souvenir shop have recently been added.

Welchman Hall St Thomas 001 246 438 6640/41/43/44 www.harrisonscave.com Tours are daily between 9am and 4pm £20

5. Barbados Wildlife Reserve

Take a drive to the north of the island to the Barbados Wildlife Reserve, close to the Farley Hill National Park, where one of the island's greatest plantation houses was destroyed by fire in 1965. All that is left are the magnificent ruins, surrounded by lush grounds, popular for picnics and concerts.

In the wildlife reserve, expect to spot the famous Barbados green monkey along with parrots, flamingos and peacocks – some of which can be seen in a walk-through aviary.

Most of the animals are free to wander, but many visitors will be relieved to note that the snakes are one of the exceptions. Expect to see iguanas, turtles, tortoises, deer, caiman and armadillo.

Nearby is the Grenade Hall Forest and Signal Station, with admission included on the wildlife reserve ticket. This restored signal station is set in a natural forest and offers amazing views across the island.

Scenic Barbados Tours (001 246 428 9108, www.scenicbarbadostours.net) offers a half-day island tour to the Wildlife Reserve, the Flower Forest and the east coast with prices from £33.

Where to Eat

1. The Cliff

Regarded as the best and most famous restaurant on the island, The Cliff is the place to be seen. Its oceanfront, cliff-top setting is enough to whet any diner's appetite and the cuisine tempts customers from far and wide with delicacies such as tartare of scallops, chargrilled tuna on garlic mash and white chocolate cheesecake. Reservations are required. Derricks, St. James 001 246 432 1922 www.thecliffbarbados.com £75

2. La Mer

La Mer is praised for its dramatic setting overlooking the lagoon at the upmarket Port St Charles complex near the top of the west coast, and for its far-ranging cuisine. As well as tasty fish and cuts of meat, it also boasts a good choice of vegetarian fare and is famous for its Sunday brunches in the winter high season.
Port St. Charles Speightstown, St Peter 001 246 419 2000 £50

3. Angry Annie's

This is a place for typically Bajan fare (even though it is run by a couple from Birmingham). Housed in a brightly-painted, traditional wooden chattel house in Holetown on the west coast, this is where you can try local specialities such as Bajan style fresh fish, lobster in mornay or garlic sauce and a good choice of Barbados curries.
1st Street Holetown, St. James 001 246 432 2119 £20

4. Waterfront Café

The Waterfront Café is in the centre of Bridgetown by the marina, making it a popular spot. Take your pick from all-American hamburgers or local alternatives such as crab rissoles or jerk pork. It also has live jazz most evenings.
The Careenage Bridgetown, 001 246 427 0093 www.waterfrontcafe.com.bb £12

5. Bean 'n Bagel

This tiny bistro is famous for its all-day breakfasts but it's also good for snacks. Choose between omelettes, pancakes, quiche, salads or lasagne while surfing on the web – and remember to bring cash as it doesn't accept credit cards. Dover Christ Church 001 246 420 4604 £8

Where to shop

Bridgetown is the main area for shopping and the hub is Broad Street, where you'll find the island's largest department store, Cave Shepherd, which dates from 1906 and sells perfumes and cosmetics, sunglasses, books, china and crystal plus designer clothes such as Tommy Hilfiger, Liz Claiborne and Dockers. There are also numerous jewellers in the area, as well as craft shops and boutiques selling casual clothing and swimwear.

Just outside the capital is the Bayshore shopping complex on the south coast and the Pelican Shopping Village near the cruise terminal. See "Arrival", above, for more information on shops by the port.

Other shopping spots on the island include Holetown and Speightstown on the west coast, and St Lawrence Gap on the south coast.

Essentials

Time difference: Four hours behind GMT.

Currency: Barbados dollar. The US dollar is widely accepted

Official language: English

Getting around: It is easy to hire a car at the cruise port. If you wish to rent a scooter you must obtain a permit from a local police station. Passengers who don't want to drive can hire their own driver, or take a taxi. The bus service is good and ranges from government-run buses (for which you need exact change) or private minibuses, which stop anywhere. These, however, drive at break-neck speeds and often blast out booming music, so are not for the faint hearted.

Tourist office: There is a Barbados tourism information office at the cruise terminal (001 246 426 1718, www.visitbarbados.org). Its main office is in Harbour Road, Bridgetown (001 246 427 2623/2624).

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