

TRAVEL CURATOR

WORTH TRAVELING FOR



My introduction to Barbados, the most easterly of the Caribbean islands, came when I was in middle school via one of my then-favorite books, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. Set in 1687, the fictitious story follows 16-year-old Kit who leaves her home in Barbados to live with relatives in dismal, gray, Puritan Connecticut. Kit's colorful clothing and carefree spirit, coupled with the fact that she could swim (a skill she learned as a child in Barbados), prompted villagers to accuse her of witchcraft. While fictitious, the story had me dreaming of the far-off, tropical island and its aquamarine waters, flying fish, and abundant mango trees.

My second brush with Barbados came in my early 20s. Fresh out of college and renting a cottage on a New Jersey Christmas tree farm, my elderly landlord, Ossie, would spend summer and autumn pruning and shaping his Frasier and Douglas fir trees; November and December, selling them. (Every year, he would haul my tree – in his Santa-red tractor – right to my doorstep; even place it in the tree stand.) Those aware of his age would ask when he planned to retire, slow down, and always – his eyes crinkling, head thrown back in laughter – he would say: “Never, the trees are my Barbados.” And as soon as the stockings were hung, he would escape the frozen northeast tundra and spend the next six weeks basking on the beach and deep-sea fishing in Barbados.



Courtesy, O2 Beach Club and Spa

Historically, Barbados – the birthplace of rum (and singer, Rihanna) – has been a British invasion. Often said to be the most British of all of the Caribbean islands (and last standing under its flag), Barbados has consistently attracted U.K. travelers to its shores. When I finally made my way there in the early aughts, I met few (actually only two) other Americans. Everyone staying at my posh, five-star, west coast hotel – celebrated for its cerulean waters, afternoon tea, and traditional, white-glove service – was British.

WELCOME TO THE SOUTH SIDE

But recently, on a return visit, I notice a shift in the island's traveler demographics. At my hotel, O2 Beach Club and Spa, a premium, all-inclusive resort on Barbados' south coast, there are as many Americans as Brits. The crowd also skews significantly younger with honeymooners, girlfriends on getaways, and families vacationing with their young-adult children. In the stand-alone, adults-only luxury collection which debuted in 2022, private terraces overlook the aquamarine sea and curvy pool framed by hot pink and tangerine sun loungers and umbrellas.

Interiors feature modern, contemporary decor: a sliding barn door opens to a marble bath with freestanding tub and walk-in shower; ocean-inspired artwork (octopus, sea turtles) by local artists line the walls; while a magenta-pink rug in the shape of a hibiscus flower adds a pop of color to the hardwood floors.



Courtesy, O2 Beach Club and Spa

Over vintage glasses of bubbly rosé in the resort's fine-dining restaurant, Oro, Patricia Affonso-Dass, ceo/group general manager for Ocean Hotels Group, offers insight into the island's changing style of luxury. A piano player croons, black-and-white photos of Old Hollywood (Judy Garland, Elvis) frame the wall behind us, as a well-heeled couple – she in long silk dress, he in linen – swish past.

Affonso-Dass smiles. “Many of today's luxury travelers are younger, seeking a more relaxed and modern aesthetic, and (I think) a closer connection to the people serving them. Traditionally, in Barbados, service has been very ‘proper English.’ Staff would only speak [to guests] when spoken to first. We saw opportunity to introduce luxury in a different way.”

Each of O2's four dining venues offers a distinct ambience, experience, and mood. Oro, with its Old Hollywood vibe and ornate decor, offers a glamorous experience: hand-crafted cocktails, a three-course fine-dining menu, and stunning ocean views from the ninth floor. Brisa offers rooftop tapas and cocktails (perfect for sunset, there's even a plunge pool); Elements, facing the sea and aptly named for its fusion of water, fire, metal, and air, is the go-to breakfast, lunch, and dinner; while Bluefin, the poolside restaurant, is perfect for lunch (try the fish tacos) and casual (salad, pizza, burger) dinners.



Courtesy, O2 Beach Club and Spa

The original resort suites, housed in a building separate from the adults-only collection, also feature elegantly updated kitchens complete with stainless steel appliances and refrigerators stocked with complimentary groceries. Private chef service is also available. For those wishing to venture outside the resort, there is an array of bar and restaurant choices including the famous Oistin's Fish Fry, where vendors fry fresh fish on open grills, set up bars, and attendees dance to live music.

"Because of where we are located (south coast), it's an easy walk to shopping, restaurants, and nightlife," says Affonso-Dass, noting that each Barbados coast is dramatically different.

OCEAN INSPIRED

The west coast of Barbados – home to celebrities Mick Jagger, Tiger Woods, Richard Branson, and the island's long-standing traditional resorts – offers calmer, flatter waters and the more traditional style typically associated with the Caribbean. Both the northern and east coasts – void of hotel development – are loved (especially by locals and adventure-seeking travelers) for their wild surf and rugged terrain. Here, surfing, kitefoiling (and on land, hiking), are much-loved pastimes. Meanwhile, the south coast (where half of the island's 250,000 population reside) comes with wider beaches, a notable marina, downtown shopping district (visitors love Bridgetown Duty Free on Broad Street), a buzzy weekend farmer's market, horse racing, and many historic sites including Rihanna's tiny, childhood home.



Courtesy, O2 Beach Club and Spa

Over the next few days, I experience, just a sliver of this newly emerging luxury on the south coast.

“Welcome.”

After morning coffee on my terrace overlooking the sea, and a light breakfast of fresh fruit (watermelon, pineapple) and yogurt at Elements (note: cooked breakfast and an omelette station are always available), I take the elevator eight stories up to Acqua Spa where I am met with aquamarine ocean views from every direction. A stunning, lifesize turquoise-on-white sculpture – 101 pieces of waving, individually crafted seaweed – greets me. Created by artists Sandy Layne and Sonia Burke, the installation is made from PVC that is heated to twist, and then airbrushed.

“Shall we?”



Courtesy, O2 Beach Club and Spa

My attendant leads me first to change and then to the private, uber-spacious hammam steam room (reportedly Barbados' only one) for 15 minutes to soften and relax tight muscles. There are only four treatment rooms – Sea Salt, Limestone, Gigartina, and Undaria – all with ocean views. The product line, Osea (based in Malibu, California), is also ocean inspired, and draws upon seaweed hand harvested off the coast of Patagonia.

I have reserved the Vagus Nerve (the longest cranial nerve in the body) meditative massage, and for the next 80 minutes or so, my therapist Natalia gently kneads, stretches, and rocks my body into relaxed oblivion.

MUSTS BEYOND THE RESORT

Seeing Barbados from the water is one of the must-do recommendations Affonso-Dass gave me during our decadent Oro dinner of fresh-caught red snapper followed by rum-infused creme brulee. And for this, I reserve a spot aboard The Cat and the Fiddle, a 62-foot catamaran, which (along with its sister, 63-foot Over the Moon) is considered the most luxurious on the island. The stunning vessel, with its creamy air-conditioned interior, multiple outdoor decks, and smartly dressed (white shorts, blue shirts) crew sets sail from Bridgetown, skimming smoothly along the south and west coasts. Twice along the way, we stop to snorkel, first with sea turtles and later, atop a shipwreck, where I spot more turtles, a few giant tarpon, and schools of brilliant blue-yellow tropical fish.



Courtesy, O2 Beach Club and Spa

Rum punch, hand-crafted cocktails, and bubbly flow freely for the duration of the sail, yet this is not a party boat. After snorkeling, we anchor in front of the very hotel I visited so many years ago, easily identifiable by its pink beach umbrellas, where we dine on a lavish buffet of fresh-caught fish, cucumber, caesar, and rice salads, and macaroni pie. More dips into the azure water follow – to swim, float, stand-up paddle board, or simply just be – before setting sail back to the marina; brownies topped with vanilla ice cream served on the ride home.

The next morning, after a restful sleep (my doors flung wide open to the lull of the waves), I rise early to visit yet another treasure, Brighton Farmer's Market. Open only on Saturdays starting at 6 a.m.) the locally owned market (technically not on the south coast but close in nearby St. George) is a feast for both the eyes and palate. Wooden stalls spill with ripe mangos, dragonfruit, pineapple, and every vegetable imaginable; artists sell their hand-crafted jewelry and baskets, island-inspired paintings and postcards; while lines form for fresh-brewed coffee, "tiki" pies, baked fish, and breakfast waffles, pancakes, and omelettes. Plates are carried to a grassy lawn lined with picnic tables where market goers dine under shady flamboyant trees, in full orange bloom during my visit.

The market started in 2001, with the idea to sell carrots (owner Alison Pile's husband is an island carrot farmer). In time, it grew to include other local fruits and vegetables and a playground for young children was added. During the pandemic, the market morphed as locals embraced the concept of socializing outdoors.

"It went 'ka-boom,'" Alison recalls, handing me a cup of her Carrot Cup coffee (a mocha). "Now it's *the* thing to do on a Saturday morning. In December (high season), we sometimes have 1,200 people here, both locals and visitors."



Courtesy, O2 Beach Club and Spa

Purchasing a keepsake, a small, hand-painted postcard of one of Barbados' colorful chattel houses (small, moveable wooden houses built on sets of blocks) and still sipping my mocha, I make my way back to O2 and my private terrace overlooking the sea. My day is blissfully unscripted – I can read a book, walk into town, shop at the hotel's elegant boutique (most of the items are handmade in Barbados), catch up on work. Or I can simply lounge on one of the hot pink and tangerine chaises, order fish tacos and a frothy piña colada to my chair (this is the birthplace of rum after all), and dip into the aquamarine, shades-of-blue sea.

Which, at O2, may come with a gentle wave.

Feature image courtesy of O2 Beach Club and Spa. In partnership with O2 Beach Club and Spa.