

TRAVEL

BARBADOS IS IDEAL IN AUTUMN - HERE'S WHERE TO BOOK

Find authentic Bajan spirit, and fewer crowds, on the south of the island, writes **Martin Kimber**, who went on a rum-procuring mission

FOR years travellers have flocked to the pristine West Coast of Barbados – but could the South Side of the island offer a different perspective? Yes, essentially: those hoping to experience authentic Bajan culture as well as stay in luxury accommodation now have a variety of options on this lesser-explored part of the island. I stayed in two different Ocean Hotels Group Barbados properties to find out how this Bajan-owned hospitality company is helping redefine the lesser-visited coast of their island, as well as the perception of all-inclusive holidays.

SEA BREEZE BEACH HOUSE: A RELAXED PREMIUM GETAWAY
There's something of The White Lotus about Sea Breeze Beach House in Christchurch. Tiki torches flicker against the ink-black sky, free of light pollution, as a member of staff takes your bags. It's rare to instantly feel like the eight-hour flight from Heathrow was worth it – but after a welcome rum punch cocktail, you immediately feel at ease.

As a welcome treat, we'd pre-booked Sea Breeze's premium restaurant, Cerulean, which only opens on Saturday evenings and boasts a menu that wouldn't look out of place in Mayfair. The cod and plantain salad represents excellent, elevated Bajan cooking.

A common theme I noticed throughout the Ocean Hotels portfolio is the exceptional patience and attentiveness of the staff. Hospitality and tourism is the lifeblood of the Bajan economy and that fact shines through in every interaction. Forty per cent of Barbados's GDP flows from tourism, and it employs a third of the nation's workforce – hospitality here isn't merely a job, but a profession.

Of the many things to do on the South Side of the island, my favourite was to do nothing. The first day was spent lounging in a cabana just feet from the ocean. As for the water, it was so richly sparkly that it looked like an alchemist had melted thousands of emeralds and sapphires.

There's a large beach, with plenty of shady spots to shelter from the reliable 30-degree heat.

Wellness was on the agenda for day two. The spa offers a wide range of treatments, but I went for a back and neck massage, which the masseuse got exactly right.

Later that evening we took in some of the famous South Side nightlife. The hotel provides a shuttle into town on Friday nights for the weekly Oistins Fish Market fish fry, a warm, loud and proud celebration of Bajan culture, featuring an array of local fish and side dishes.

My swordfish steak came deliciously adorned with (yet more) plantain and sweet potato, and a bottle or two of the famous Banks local beer. A round of cocktails in the upmarket bar afterwards was only £8 a drink, an affordable (and strong) nightcap for anyone wanting to stay out.

On the third day, it was time to say goodbye to the Sea Breeze, as we set sail on a catamaran for a day of sun, sea and wild swimming. I found myself in what felt like the inside of the London Aquarium as I swam among schools of fish weaving their way through a shipwreck teaming with life. On board lunch, of course, consisted of Bajan fish and chicken and enough rum punch to make Jack Sparrow raise an eyebrow.

O2 BEACH CLUB AND SPA: A SLICE OF MIAMI LUXURY

We headed to the O2 Beach Club and Spa, a kilometre up the coast from the Sea Breeze, for the final nights of the trip. This hotel has a distinct luxury feel, which makes it a little less well suited to families, though children are welcome.

The O2 borders on a smaller beach, features two swim-up bars, a selection of excellent restaurants (including fine dining), and a spa with one of the island's best views of the ocean. Enjoying a drink at the swim-up bar, as the Atlantic Ocean brawls with the Caribbean Sea in the background, is one of the many utterly fulfilling moments that make the O2 a temple of relaxation.

The next day was met with strong



Atlantic winds, palm fronds thrashing like flags, but this odd dose of inclement weather was appreciated as a brief pause from the sun.

On the South coast of Barbados, the climate has as much character as the rum punch, which differs slightly in every restaurant and bar you visit. I found it a welcome change from other winter sun destinations, which experience uninterrupted laser beams of sunshine all day long.

THE SOUTH SIDE'S VARIETY

The biggest difference between the South and West became most apparent when we explored the island

on an open-air 'safari'.

We saw monkeys, egrets and lizards as we drove in-land through swamp territory. There are multiple nature sanctuaries on the island, including the Graeme Hall Nature Sanctuary.

Part of our safari took in the popular, touristy West Coast, where I was shown how overly-polished some of the resorts and towns here have become. Holetown, the original landing spot of British settlers in the 17th Century, is pristinely kept, resembling something closer to the affluent suburban US East Coast than the Caribbean. The local supermarket even features several aisles of

BOOK THIS

O2 Beach Club & Spa start at £426 per night. Rates for Sea Breeze Beach House start at £337 per night. The Rockley is from £182 per night – all based on two people sharing on a bed and breakfast basis. Direct flights from London on BA or Virgin start from approximately £500 in low season.

Waitrose products, for those who miss the comforts from home.

A calmer sea, British crumpets and slightly less wind might be what has attracted the majority of tourists in the past – but it doesn't feel like the authentic Barbados travellers should experience.

Having never been to the Caribbean, I didn't know what to expect, but minutes from the O2, you stumble on local bars and restaurants teaming with a mixture of tourists and residents.

At The Rockley, another of the other Ocean Hotels group hotels five miles from The O2 and the Sea

Breeze, you'll be steps from the more conventionally touristy Richard Haynes Boardwalk. This Christ Church attraction is adorned with hospitality businesses and makes for a pleasant evening stroll along the beach.

The mood on the island is hopeful, more optimistic than at any point since the pandemic, the locals tell me. Maybe that's their general disposition, or maybe it's because they're feeling the effects of their economy growing by more than double that of the UK last year.

To feel the full force of that growth, I'd recommend heading to Barbados' buzzing South Coast.