

The insiders' guide to the Caribbean

We asked local experts to share the best places to eat, play, sun and stay in their backyard

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What's the best way to retreat, relax and recharge in the Caribbean? Here are some tips from the people who live and work there.

BARBADOS

Where a week is barely enough. Arrive in five hours, non-stop from Toronto. **Your insider guide:** Patricia Affonso-Dass, CEO and group general manager, Ocean Hotels.

Of all the Caribbean islands you could visit, why choose Barbados? Is it A: Because the coral island has some of the best beaches and clearest water in the region? B: Because it's so far southeast that it's beyond the "hurricane belt" and therefore a safer bet during the June-to-November storm season? Or C: Because it's the birthplace of rum, and you can tour distilleries, tasting the golden nectar to your heart's content?

Hotelier Patricia Affonso-Dass, who has lived here for 27 years, believes the answer should be D: All of the above. "People have the idea that we're an expensive destination, but we have hotels and experiences at all price points, and excellent public transport so visitors can get around affordably," she says. Although the island is only 430 square kilometres, Affonso-Dass suggests planning a stay of at least a week to experience the popular west and south coasts (where you'll find most hotels and restaurants) as well as the rugged Atlantic-facing east coast, which is tranquil, more rural and attracts wind-watersports aficionados.

No matter how long you're here for, beaches will likely be top of your to-do list. Rockley Beach is lined with restaurants and bars, so you'll never have to leave your chaise when the craving for a rum punch strikes. At sunrise, you can watch grooms from the nearby race track bathe their horses in the limpid shallows at Pebbles Beach, a daily ritual that's become a draw for early-rising visitors. Miami Beach (a.k.a. Enterprise Beach) is Affonso-Dass's go-to. "It's the perfect mix of powder-white sand, sunshine and shade, and water that's every possible colour of blue."

Joining at least one rum distillery tour in this rum-centric destination is practically required. Mount Gay, which dates from 1703, is the oldest, and runs one of the rare Caribbean rum tours that doesn't gloss over the labour of enslaved people. On a rainy afternoon, venture 30 metres underground to Harrison's Cave for an electric tram ride through the 3.2-kilometre-long network of caverns, surrounded by centuries-old stalagmites and stalactites. Despite its modest hills and lack of mountains, Barbados has an enthusiastic hiking community. Avid hiker Affonso-Dass recommends contacting the Barbados Hiking Association for info on their weekly treks.

While there's here's no shortage of fine-dining restaurants here, Affonso-Dass feels that some of the best Bajan culinary experiences are the simplest. Don't leave without sampling a fried fish cutter (sandwich) from Cuz's food truck on Pebbles Beach or Caboose in Speightstown. And when it's time for something fancier? Oro, on the ninth floor at O2 Beach Club & Spa (which she manages), is her No. 1 pick for its Caribbean fusion cuisine. "I might be biased," she admits, "but with stunning 270-degree views of to-die-for sunsets, it's an experience that excites all the senses."