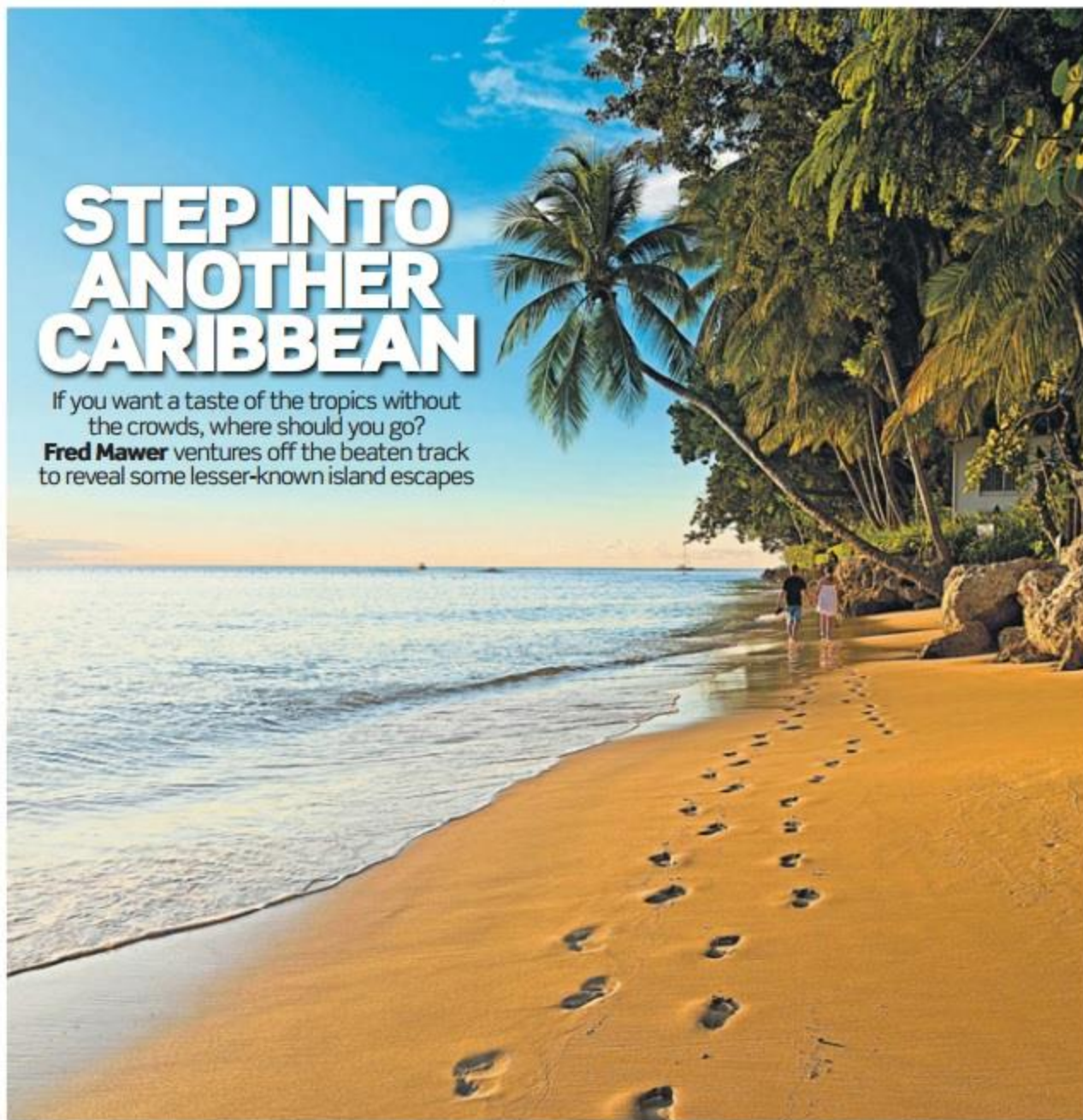


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STEP INTO ANOTHER CARIBBEAN

If you want a taste of the tropics without the crowds, where should you go?
Fred Mawer ventures off the beaten track to reveal some lesser-known island escapes



Palm-smothered slopes run down to little villages and empty beaches

ANGUILLA

This low-lying and arid British Overseas Territory has arguably the Caribbean's finest beaches. There are 33, many with white sand so powder-soft you sink up to your ankles – and even the most popular, such as Rendezvous Bay and Shoal Bay East, are uncrowded. Other draws include high-end restaurants, several of the best luxury beachfront hotels – Cap Juluca, Viceroy Anguilla and, soon to reopen after an overhaul, Malliouhana – and eye-popping villas (see wimco.com). Celebrities flock here in the winter, but the atmosphere is unshowy and there are affordable places to stay: see charmingescapes.com for options.

Getting there: British Airways or Virgin to Antigua, then Liat to Anguilla.

Sample package: with Carrier (0161 492 1354; carrier.co.uk), £2,425 b&b at Cap Juluca, which unfurls along the mile-long, secluded sands of Maundays Bay.

More information: visitanguilla.com

BEQUIA

For an easy-going, character-rich little getaway, this Grenadines island (seven square miles, population 5,000) excels in virtually every way. Verdant and hilly, Bequia is exceptionally pretty – Admiralty Bay, dotted with yachts, is one of the Caribbean's most pleasing-on-the-eye natural harbours. At its rear, the village capital of Port Elizabeth is a friendly, hassle-free place, and, enlivened by regular ferries from St Vincent and the other Grenadines, has just the right amount of bustle. The island has a decent choice of laid-back bars and restaurants. Some back on to the waterfront Belmont Walkway

at Port Elizabeth – a great place to gather in the evening. Around the island are several golden-sand beaches, high-quality small hotels and self-catering to suit all budgets, from lavish villas to simple apartments.

Getting there: BA or Virgin to Barbados, then SVG Air or Mustique Airways to Bequia.

Sample package: with Just Bequia (01373 814244;

justbequia.co.uk), £1,295 b&b in the smart Bequia Beach Hotel, on the peaceful Friendship Bay beach.

More information: bequatourism.com

NEVIS

Little green Nevis has a slow-paced, old-fashioned charm to it. This is evident in Charlestown, the pretty, diminutive capital, with its “skirt and shirt” buildings (stone ground floors, wooden first floors), and in the elegant and utterly relaxing plantation-house hotels that date from the island's sugar-cane-producing era in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The classiest is Montpelier Plantation, while Nisbet Plantation Beach Club is by a beach – unusual for a plantation hotel; the rural, antique-filled Hermitage, dating from 1680, is the most atmospheric and homely. These hotels are what make Nevis most memorable, though the island does have a lovely long, sandy beach (Pinney's) and a dormant volcano (Nevis Peak) if you fancy a challenging climb.

Getting there: BA to St Kitts, then a 45-minute ferry or quicker water taxi to Nevis.

Sample package: with Kenwood Travel (020 7749

9220; kenwoodtravel.co.uk), £1,295 b&b at The Hermitage.

More information:

nevisisland.com. Read *Telegraph* Travel's full guide to Nevis at telegraph.co.uk/destinations.

DOMINICA

Come to mountainous, rainforest-coated Dominica to be active. Hike along some of its 300 miles of trails – the most popular tough trek heads out to the Boiling Lake, a flooded fumarole. Bathe under towering waterfalls, tube down rivers, snorkel over geothermal springs at the Champagne Reef, and go whale watching – sightings of sperm whales off Dominica are common in the winter months. To rest up, there are a number of delightful, nature-oriented guesthouses and small hotels. Big cruise ships include Dominica on their itineraries, but it is easy to escape from their crowds.

Getting there: British Airways or Virgin to Antigua, then Liat to Dominica.

Sample package: with MotMot Travel (01327 359622; motmottravel.com), £1,250 b&b at Rosalie Bay, a riverside and beachfront hotel with lovely gardens, good food and a wide programme of hikes and tours.

More information: discoverdominica.com

BONAIRE

Dry, cactus-covered Bonaire is the sleepest and least populated of the Dutch Caribbean's so-called ABC islands that lie outside the hurricane belt off Venezuela (the others being Aruba and Curaçao). Its biggest draw is diving and snorkelling. The entire coastline is protected by the Bonaire National Marine Park – hence the rich diversity of underwater life – and the majority of the 80-plus sites are accessible from the shore,

so excellent for beginners.

Windsurfing is also first-rate for all ages and abilities at shallow, reef-protected Lac Bay, and for a change from watersports, there's flamingo watching – thousands nest on the island's lagoons and salt pans.

Getting there: KLM to Bonaire, changing planes in Amsterdam.

Sample package: with Caribbean Fun Travel (01604 882929; caribbeanfuntravel.co.uk), £1,497 b&b at the Harbour Village Beach Club – on one of the island's few white-sand beaches, and with an on-site dive centre.

More information: tourismbonaire.com

HARBOUR ISLAND, THE BAHAMAS

The Bahamas offer two very different holiday faces. On the one hand, there are the enormous high-rise resorts, casinos, cruise-ship hordes and party-loving weekenders from Florida on main islands such as New Providence/Paradise Island. On the other hand, peace, space and pristine beaches set the tone on the Out Islands, the most fashionable of which is three-mile-long Harbour Island. Running along virtually its whole length is famous Pink Sands Beach, composed of powdered coral. Almost as photogenic is neat and chic Dunmore Town, with its colourful old clapboard houses and white picket fences, art galleries and enticing cafés. The preferred means of transport on the island is the golf buggy.

Getting there: BA to Nassau, then an onward flight to North Eleuthera airport, and a 10-minute water taxi to Harbour Island; also daily fast ferry Nassau-Harbour Island.

Sample package: with Bahamas Flavour (0870 066 9975; bahamasflavour.co.uk),

£1,550 b&b for six nights at the recently spruced-up Coral Sands Hotel, right on Pink Sands Beach and a short stroll to Dunmore Town,

with a one-night stopover in New Providence.

More information: bahamas.co.uk

MONTSERRAT

A British Overseas Territory, Montserrat is dominated by the active Soufrière Hills Volcano. Its eruption in the Nineties blanketed Plymouth, the former capital, in debris, and resulted in the emigration of more than half of Montserrat's population of 12,000. Two thirds of Montserrat is still an exclusion zone, with life now focused in the north. You can take in the volcano from safe viewing points, including the

Montserrat Volcano Observatory, and on boat trips. Other reasons to visit include birdwatching (twitchers revel in the chance to spot the island's rare national bird, the Montserrat oriole), snorkelling and diving – and the island's wonderfully unhurried pace.

Getting there: British Airways or Virgin to Antigua, then Fly Montserrat to Montserrat.

Sample package: with MotMot Travel (01327 359622; motmottravel.com), £1,645 room-only staying six nights at Olveston House – set in tropical gardens, the former plantation home is owned by Beatles producer Sir George Martin – plus a one-night stopover on Antigua.

More information: visitmontserrat.com

BARACOA, CUBA

Away from its bland resorts, Cuba has many special places, but none more so than remote Baracoa near the far eastern end of the island. Dating from 1512, it's Cuba's

oldest settlement, with ancient, brightly painted clapboard houses on its streets, a *casa del chocolate* serving drinks made with local cocoa, and an atmospheric *casa de la trova* (live music venue). The surrounding countryside is

Eden-like in its fertility, with banana, cocoa and coconut groves blanketing hillsides. There are quiet dark and golden-sand beaches nearby, such as Maguana, and a striking flat-topped mountain, El Yunque, to ascend.

Getting there: Virgin to Havana, then on to Baracoa with a Cuban airline. Or drive (though it's a long way); some Cuban airlines have dubious safety records.

Sample package: with Esencia Experiences (01481 714898; esenciaexperiences.com), £1,378 b&b staying five nights at hilltop El Castillo, a characterful but simple hotel converted from a fort, plus two nights in Havana.

More information: travel2cuba.co.uk

NORTHERN GRENADA

Tourism in Grenada concentrates in the south-west corner, with few visitors making it up to the lush, slow-paced north. Those who do are normally on day trips, heading for Belmont Estate (a good-quality agritourism attraction), River Antoine Rum Distillery (possibly the oldest still operating in the Caribbean) and Bathway Beach, a mile of windswept sands with natural rock pools. The only hotel up here is highly recommended Petite Anse. Set above a wild beach (swimming is often not safe), it's run by a couple from Worcestershire, and has something of the atmosphere of a laid-back English country-house hotel. The owners can arrange guided hikes, and trips with a fisherman to a deserted

offshore island.

Getting there: BA or Virgin to Grenada; transfers from the airport to Petite Anse take around 75 minutes.

Sample package: with Just Grenada (01373 814214; justgrenada.co.uk), £1,125 b&b at Petite Anse.

More information: grenadagrenadines.com. Read *Telegraph* Travel's full guide to Grenada at telegraph.co.uk/destinations.

PORT ANTONIO, JAMAICA

With jungle-coated hillsides descending to unspoilt beaches, Jamaica's north-east corner is the most scenic. Port Antonio, its main town, was once a banana port, but is now a snoozy, dilapidated backwater. The most picturesque beach is river-fed Frenchman's Cove; other attractions include waterfalls with pools in which to swim, gentle river rafting down the Rio Grande, and barbecued food from the roadside "jerk centres" at Boston Bay.

A playground for Hollywood stars in the Fifties and Sixties, the Port Antonio area is undergoing a revival, notably with the recent reopening of the very stylish Trident Hotel. Its sister property, Geejam, is a gorgeous hideaway with a professional recording studio.

Getting there: BA to Kingston, from where it is a two-hour drive up to Port Antonio.

Sample package: with Caribtours (020 7751 0660; caribtours.co.uk), £2,245 b&b at the Trident Hotel.

More information: visitjamaica.com. Read *Telegraph* Travel's full guide to Jamaica at telegraph.co.uk/destinations.

EAST COAST BARBADOS

Just 45 minutes' drive from the busy west and south coasts, Barbados's eastern shore is a different world – palm-smothered slopes running down to little villages

and empty beaches bashed by Atlantic breakers. Bathsheba, with its eroded, mushroom-shaped rocks, is a beautiful spot: swimming is unsafe, but the waves attract surfers. At the fishing hamlet of Tent Bay are two excellent places to stay: the Atlantis, dating from the 19th century, and restored with a colonial-chic look; and rustic Sea-U Guesthouse (seaubarbarados.com; from £100 b&b a night per room), with hammocks strung up on bedroom verandas. A walk up the hill brings you to the delightful Andromeda Botanic Gardens.

Getting there: BA or Virgin.
Sample package: with Tropic Breeze (01752 880880; tropicbreeze.co.uk), £1,398 b&b at the Atlantis; packages are possible combining stays at the hotel with its sister property Little Good Harbour on Barbados's west coast.

More information: visitbarbarados.org. Read *Telegraph* Travel's full guide to Barbados at telegraph.co.uk/destinations.

Prices, correct at the time of going to press, are per person for seven nights in December, based on two sharing the cheapest accommodation and including economy flights and transfers.



Clockwise from top left, bathe under waterfalls in Dominica; Charlestown on the island of Nevis, with Mount Nevis in the background; Dunmore Town in the Bahamas; find a wealth of diverse wildlife in Bonaire; colourful shopfronts add character to Port Antonio



