

Barbados

The Place For The Rich And Famous

By **DOMINICK A. MERLE**

BRIDGETOWN, Barbados -The British imported African slaves to this tiny island in the 17th Century to cut sugar cane. In the process, they lent the slaves their accents and introduced them to staid old English traditions like polo, cricket afternoon tea...that sort of thing.



Bridgetown

بريدجتاون

It would take more than 300 years before black leadership emerged and the island gained its independence. And now, the governing Bajans "import" tourists to fill the beaches---with the vast majority of those sunseekers coming from merry old England.

So, in effect, today's Brits are paying the black Bajans for the right to holiday on this Caribbean hideaway. As the saying goes, turnabout is fair play. The Bajans still enjoy cricket, polo and afternoon tea, but they do it to a distinctly different beat than the former

landowners, and the island's economy- now centered on tourism instead of sugar--- never looked better.

New construction and major renovation projects are at an all-time high and no one seems to remember when the last ➤

business went belly-up. Consequently, although the entire island is a mere 34 kilometers long by 22 kilometers wide, it can take an hour and a half to drive from one point to another during rush hour, which is most of the time. Anyone who doesn't have a job here probably doesn't really want one, and just about everyone you talk to is bullish about Barbados. Take Marilyn Sofer. She left a solid job as general manager of the Toronto Hilton, a thriving operation, to become general manager of the Barbados Hilton, a start-up property with no guarantees. "Everybody thought I was a little crazy," Marilyn said, "but I didn't see any way we could fail down here."

So far, her intuition has paid off. Open for less than a year, the hotel began with a 37 percent occupancy rate and was in the 90s regularly when I visited in December. "All that and sunshine year around," she added. Just up the road, and just about everything is just up the road on this cozy island, is the plush Sandy Lane resort where the price of an overnight ranges from \$850 to a whopping \$25,000! You read right--\$25,000 for one night in a 7,300 square foot, 5-bedroom villa during Christmas and New Year. The sprawling resort was built in 1961 and its guest list reads like a veritable Who's Who—Queen Elizabeth, Aristotle Onassis, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Frank Sinatra, David Niven and even the reclusive Greta Garbo all slept here. In 1996, in a dazzling display of confidence, the entire resort was demolished, then rebuilt and expanded in the same neo-Palladian style as the original. This multi-million dollar overhaul took five years, and a lot of moxie. "We were confident that our guests would return," said chief executive Michael Pownall. "The soul of the original complex is still here." Again just up the road, we visited Cobblers Cove, a boutique-style luxury hotel with the charm and elegance of an English country house. The 40 suites there, ranging from about \$400 to \$2,400 a night, open to terraces and balconies with views of the gardens or the seas. "Privacy and elegance are what our guests expect," said general manager Ross Stevenson. "The emphasis is on peace and relaxation, not partying." Yet there is something for just about



Hotel Resort

فندق



Bridgetown dock

مرفأ بريدجتاون

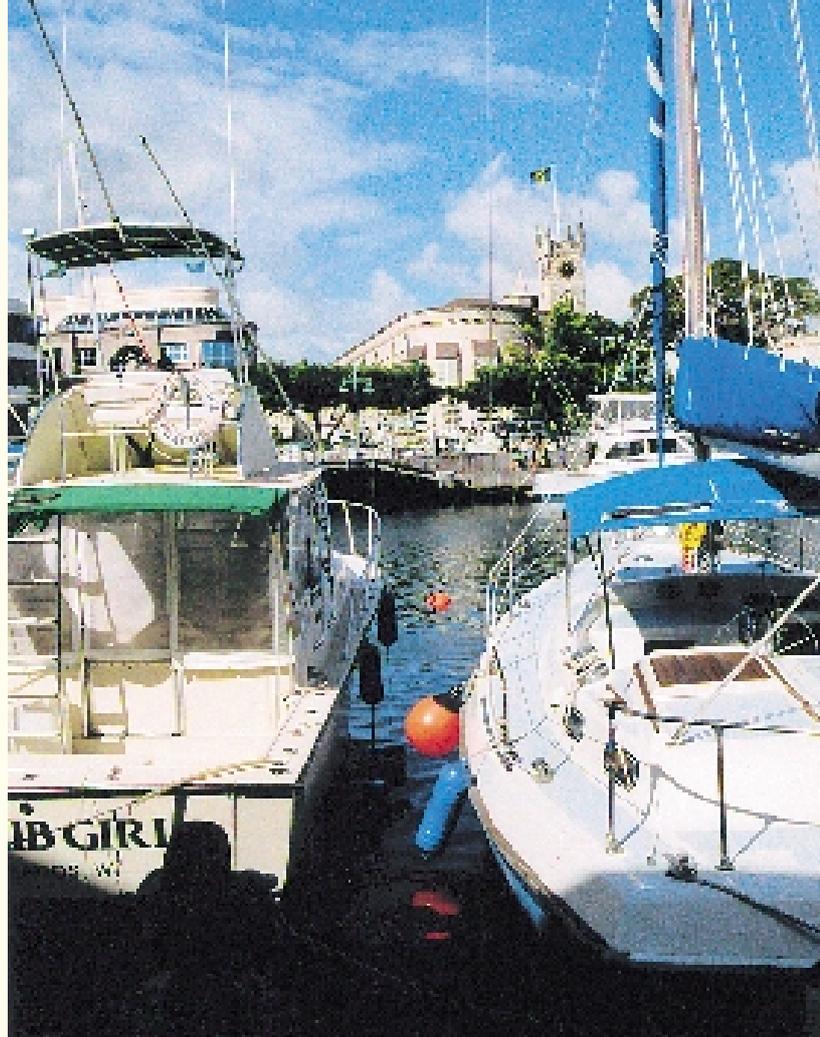
everyone on this island, including the party people, who usually converge around the Bridgetown area. "We pack a lot of diversity into a little space," said our driver, Emerson, who took us on a half-day tour of the island. "And then I get to meet people like you from all over the world every day. It's kind of like I'm a tourist myself." Barbados is surrounded by over 70 miles of beaches, with the vast majority of the resorts on the west coast facing the Caribbean Sea. For the most part, the Atlantic east coast is too rugged and dangerous for swimming, but many international surfing competitions take place there annually, particularly around the picturesque village of Bathsheba.

Other attractions on the east coast include the Andromeda Gardens which house an array of plants from all over the tropical world, Consett Bay, a lovely sheltered inlet where fishermen can be seen landing their catch most afternoons, and Crane Beach, once a harbor where ships were loaded and unloaded by cranes from the cliff tops. Perched on one cliff is Barbados' oldest resort, the Crane Beach Hotel, still a favorite spot for honeymooners. There are several choices of transportation in Barbados- rent a car with a valid driver's license from your home country, hire a car and driver for a half or full day, negotiate your fare with a taxi driver (there are no ➤



The flying fish

السمة الطائرة



Harbor boats

سفن المرفأ

meters), or take a bus, the most economical way. For less than a dollar, you can travel by bus anywhere you like on the island and since English is the official language, asking directions is never a problem. Most bus routes are serviced every 30 minutes.

For North Americans, driving can be a harrowing experience on the narrow and winding roads. Bajans drive on the left hand side and the honk of a horn or flashing light usually means "after you" instead of get out of my way.

We concluded our tour with the smiling Emerson back at the southwest port of Bridgetown, definitely the heart and soul of Barbados. Major attractions include the Parliament Building, the third oldest in the English speaking world; Heroes Square, formerly known as Trafalgar Square complete with its statue of Lord Nelson, and the Old Synagogue, which dates back to 1654 and is believed to be the oldest synagogue in the western hemisphere.

Hundreds of thousands of cruise ship passengers come ashore at Bridgeport annually for a half day of sightseeing and duty free shopping, with items ranging from local crafts to South African diamonds.

The "cruisers" can be seen marching along the boardwalk like an army of ducks from the ship to the shops.

Once they've made their buys, they usually settle down at one of the outdoor restaurants for a typical lunch of flying fish and cou cou (okra cooked in cornmeal), the national dish. Other local specialties include jug-jug, a mixture of corn and green peas; pepperpot stew, a fiery variety of meats and seasonings; and two other dishes colorfully named jump-up ribs and limbo lamb.

On the other extreme, the island is fast becoming one of the culinary hotspots of the Caribbean, with renowned international chefs flown in regularly to some of the major resorts for cooking demonstrations and gastronomic dining.

On our last evening, we participated in one of those gastronomic menus back at the Barbados Hilton, where chef Denis Lartigue, fresh in from Shanghai, prepared a 10-course sampling menu that took four hours to consume. Earlier in the week, we had another international feast at The Cliff restaurant, perched on a small cliff over the Caribbean. The tiered dining terrace evoked the intimacy of a private yacht with a few friends.

I'm sure the Brits would be the first to admit that the Bajans have definitely come a long way from cou cou and sugar cane. ■ (Dominick A. Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)

IF YOU GO:

No visas are required, only a valid passport. We flew Air Canada from Toronto nonstop to Bridgetown, about a five-hour flight. Several other North American airlines also offer nonstop service. Check with your travel agent. Dress is informal, tap water is drinkable and service charges are usually added to bills. An extra 10 percent is recommended for special services.

The Barbados dollar is the official currency, and notes are in six denominations--\$2 (blue), \$5 (green), \$10 (brown), \$20 (purple), \$50 (orange) and \$100 (grey). Coins range from one cent to a dollar. ATMs are available throughout the island.

The weather is stable year around, mostly sunny and warm cooled by the northeast trade winds.

For further information, go to www.visitbarbados.org.