

# Barbados is the jewel of the Caribbean

By Graeme Morton, Calgary Herald



**The Beach View Condo Hotel on Barbados' west coast features two-and three-bedroom units, ideal for larger families or couples vacationing together.**

**Photograph by: Graeme Morton, Calgary Herald**

The verdant, pear-shaped island nation of Barbados, which can easily fit inside the city limits of my home town of Calgary, sits alone on the eastern fringe of the Caribbean, 160 kilometres from its nearest neighbour, St. Lucia.

From Barbados' dramatic east coast, there's nothing but 4,000 kilometres of ocean until you make landfall in Africa. And unlike many of its Windward Island cousins, Barbados is not volcanic in nature, it's a big ol' chunk of coral and limestone.

But somehow, it's this remoteness, this uniqueness that makes Barbados such an enchanting, sun, sea and sand alternative for Canadians who have been there-done that in Hawaii, Mexico, Cuba or the Dominican Republic.

Let's clarify two things.

From Calgary, it takes a while to get to Barbados -- four hours to Toronto, usually on the overnight "red-eye" and then a mid-morning, five-hour flight to Grantley Adams International Airport, outside the capital of Bridgetown.

But it's definitely worth it . . .

And Barbados is going to take a little bit of a bite out of your travel savings stash.

But it's absolutely worth it . . .

What you get for your in-flight patience and vacation dollars is a supremely civilized shot of personal recharging in one of the most beautiful places on Earth. This is where Simon Cowell comes to escape all those singing idols. This is where a promising young golfer named Eldrick Woods married his lovely lady tiger, Elin.

But set aside the celebrities, the first-class hotels and stunning beaches, the turquoise waters and jaw-dropping sunsets for just a moment. The real stars of Barbados, in my book, are the people, known affectionately as Bajans (pronounced BAY-juns).

Julia Belgrave-Smith was born in Barbados but spent most of her life in Calgary before coming south again last year, where she's operations manager for Island Magic, the family business. It's a destination management company that arranges airport meet-and-greets, customized vacations, weddings, family reunions, company retreats and golf getaways.

"When you come from an affluent city like Calgary, your standards are pretty high and that's where Barbados shines," said Belgrave-Smith. "We have all the amenities that a sophisticated traveller will expect, a low crime rate and a highly educated, entrepreneurial population."

One of these 280,000 warm, welcoming Bajans is Randy Hallett, our driver, courtesy of the Barbados Tourism Authority. Randy is happily married, the proud dad of three children and says driving his taxi around the island for the last 21 years is the best job in the world.

"I'm my own boss, I'm outside in the sun every day and I meet interesting people," said Hallett, who seems to know everyone on the road. Bajan drivers honk at each other all the time, but it's to say "hi", or "I'm passing you," not, "get outta my way, turkey, I'm late for a meeting!"

When I asked Randy about the recession that so preoccupies North Americans, he simply said, "this is going to pass. You can't let it dominate your life or affect what's really important in life."

Bajans wear colourful clothes, not taupes and greys. They paint their homes in pleasing pastels. They talk a lot, laugh a lot, linger over their meals and gather in the hundreds of small, open-air rum shops at night to swap stories and play dominos.

We have a lot to learn from Bajans about the quality of life.

Home to various Amerindian peoples in centuries past, Barbados was first settled by English adventurers in 1627. That uninterrupted British influence is still present, from the dozens of stately Anglican churches to graceful manor houses that dominated the inland plantations.

Sugar and rum were Barbados' economic engine for centuries, albeit produced on the collective backs of slaves brought from West Africa to work the fields. Barbados attained independence in 1966 and has since gained an enviable reputation as a stable, progressive democracy.

Bajans are a proud people and you get the sense that their collective economic progress, powered by tourism and substantial overseas investment, is reaching a sizable swath of the population, not just the elite.

We were able to experience three types of accommodation during our nine-day stay: a topflight hotel, a brand-new condo-hotel and a beachside all-inclusive resort.

The Hilton Barbados, on Needham's Point, a dramatic peninsula just south of Bridgetown, is only four years old and has all the amenities and elegant service touches travellers have come to expect from the Hilton name. Evening entertainment and karaoke under the stars around the pool bar is a lot of fun.

Midway up the sheltered west coast, at a tranquil spot named Payne's Bay, lies the Beach View condo hotel.

Opened last December, this stunning complex has 36 spacious two-and three-bedroom units ranging from 1,400 to 1,800 square feet, each complete with full kitchen and laundry facilities.

The owners have use of them for three months a year, but they're put on the rental market the other nine and are ideal for an extended family or two or three couples vacationing together.

Our final stop was the Almond Casuarina Beach Resort, a newly refurbished all-inclusive that's extremely popular with families. It's right on Maxwell Beach, but the Almond's trump card is five hectares of lush tropical gardens which the blocks of rooms cluster around.

It's also a short walk from St. Lawrence Gap, Barbados' lively district for trendy restaurants and nightspots.

Highly recommended is spending a day on an Island Safari jeep tour. Ten people can pack into the back of these tough, bright-yellow Nissan pickups, while looping you around many of Barbados' top scenic highlights in about five hours, including some laugh-inducing, teeth-loosening rumbles down jungle paths, with lunch and drinks included in the price.

Yes, the recession was still in full swing when we returned to Calgary, but Barbados was a wonderful escape, a welcoming oasis of grace, vitality, natural beauty and rejuvenation for the body, mind and soul.

Treat yourself and those you love.

You are worth it.