

25 August, 2013

ULTIMATE CARIBBEAN

The holidays aren't over. They've only just begun. The sun shines all winter in the West Indies, and our guide shows how to make the most of it: 15 idyllic islands, five cruises, plus the stars, the bars, the tunes – and how to get it all at a price you can afford

We love the Caribbean. There's nowhere else on earth that does the tropical idyll quite so well – a potent cocktail of white beaches, rum punches and warm water that's just too good to resist.

We have tried, mind you. During the recession, visitor numbers from Britain dropped by 10%. We scrimped. We saved. We sacrificed that life-giving dose of winter sun. But now, with the first signs of economic life beginning to stir, we've remembered what we were missing, and we're piling back. British Airways Holidays reports bookings up by 30% this year, and other travel companies have seen even bigger jumps. The love affair has been rekindled. And it's about time.

Our eight-page special has everything you need to know to get your shot of Caribbean perfection: how to pick the right island for you, how to get value for money, how to fit in with the locals and hang with the stars, and even what to have on your iPod while you do it. Enjoy.

✚ Unless stated, packages are for a week in early December and include flights from London. Contact the operator for regional departures

JAMAICA

For the soundtrack

One of the most varied of the Caribbean islands, Jamaica suffers from an image problem, owing to the hustle in some resorts and day-trip hotspots, and, more seriously, drug crime. Still, tourists are unlikely to encounter any trouble on the region's most colourful island, where a song is always playing.

Where to stay: if you're serious about the music, head for Geejam, near Port Antonio, a collection of cabins clustered around a music studio where Rihanna and Gorillaz have recorded. The same owners have rebooted Trident, a celeb haunt back in Errol Flynn's day and now a series of spacious sea-facing suites. Black Tomato (020 7426 9888, blacktomato.com) has four nights at Trident and three at Geejam from £2,257pp, B&B.

Jakes, at Treasure Beach, may not be the most opulent, but you'll be certain which island you're on – it works with and invites in the local community. Virgin Holidays + Hip Hotels (0844 573 2751, vhiphotels.co.uk) has seven nights from £1,175pp, room-only.

Our favourite all-inclusive is the Secrets Wild Orchid Montego Bay. Hayes & Jarvis (0844 415 1918, hayesandjarvis.co.uk) has a week from £1,299pp.



Hit the hut at Jakes, in Jamaica