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Caribbean COOL

Move over Maldives, the glitz and the glamour of the Caribbean is back. And it's even bigger and better than before, says *Theodora Fawkes*



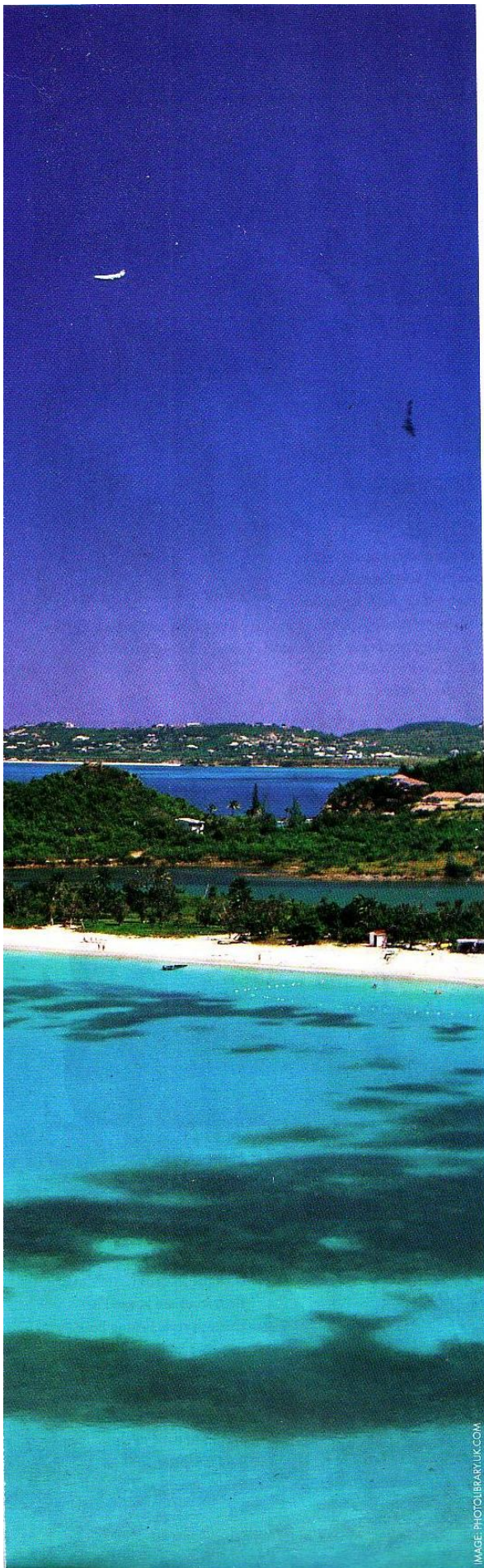


IMAGE: PHOTOLIBRARY.UK.COM

There are times when all you want is a cute little hut on the beach, a simple, thatched number, all frayed and vaguely lopsided. And then there are times when you want something entirely more sensational.

Praise be that the Caribbean has finally re-found its groove. It certainly took its time. When all about us is bitten nails and sleeping pills and takeaway quiches from Ottolenghi, don't you just sometimes want to feel part of a fabulous scene? To walk into a new place that actually has some attitude, some fire in its belly? Well, the glamour is back. And, rather winningly, back in a place that was always famous for it.

So what happened to the Caribbean? Once upon a time not so long ago, simply the word was pretty much exclusively synonymous with holidays, at least the kind of ones you really wanted to go on. Sure, there was France, there was Spain, there was Greece; Europe as a whole rolled about in the mouth while not exactly distastefully, then at least not particularly exotically at a time when exotic meant everything. The Caribbean with its definitive blue seas and skies, its tropical-ness, the fact that you went seasonally topsy-turvily at Christmas or at Easter and came back with a deep coppertone tan just as everyone was piling on their polonecks? Well, that was what a real holiday was all about.

And then, nothing. Well, not nothing exactly, but while the Caribbean rather lolled about getting sand caught up in awkward places, the rest of the world picked up the baton and ran with it. Thailand had supreme beaches and service to boot, Kenya and Tanzania had safari thrills to precursor a frolic on the beach, South Africa had style and incredible food. And that was before the Indian Ocean came rolling in with the beach world's next top supermodels, Mauritius, the Seychelles, the Maldives – which you could tell from the first episode with their ridiculously flat desert island ta-dah were easily going to win the series.

And the Caribbean? Well, it seemed to have rather fallen apart. To all intents and purposes yardies were pistol-whipping each other on the streets, second-rate resorts piled on top of each other and service was so downright bad that you were more likely to get jardia from the Turks and Caicos than the backstreets of Rajasthan (which in turn now had such lovely places to stay, and was so innately glamorous that it made the Caribbean look positively 2-ply).

It had pockets, sure (Mustique, St Barths, bits of Jamaica). But still the Caribbean as a whole just couldn't seem to pick up speed in the way that was needed. All that sunsplashed reggae, that aching insouciant Rastafarianism, that clear turquoise sea, jerk chicken cooked in half an oil drum and a cool beer in the shade of a pine thicket was somehow lost to a group of merry travellers caught up in a new winning combination of both culture and cold towels. Service, never a strong point, looked worse than ever.

And yet, and yet, in the same way that you never hear anyone going to the Caribbean in their gap year (you'd never get away with it) there's never really been anywhere like the Caribbean to signal total and utter holiday abandonment. And finally something changed. It may have been Carlisle Bay that started it. Started by trying to do something new away from the rainbow coloured bedspreads and the crappy conch chowder. It looked good. It had style. Staff could still be slow and people were itchy about bumping into the same Notting Hill mummies that they saw outside Wetherbys. But design-wise, ambition-wise, vibe-wise you could feel something had shifted.

So the Caribbean sings again. We love the huts – of course we love the huts people – but there's no point denying it we also love a little slick, a little chutzpah, a cool slice of sophistication. At the end of the day we'd all rather be looking at Christy Turlington in a bikini than a couple from Iowa with skin the colour of hammock.

Unabashed and unashamed this is *C&TH's* pick of the best Caribbean's hotspots...

Five of the best CARIBBEAN HOTELS

ANTIGUA ▶

JUMBY BAY

Fresh from a gigantic refurb, Jumby Bay has revved itself up with 28 slick new suites and a new beachfront spa. Set on its own private island, it's all here – a private plunge pool, a talcum powder perfect beach, al fresco bathrooms, and even WiFi that works.

Great for families.

RATES: From £600

jumbybayresort.com



▲ BARBADOS

CORAL REEF CLUB

Established peaceful retreat on the West Coast with the prettiest rooms imaginable.

There are glorious acres of gardens overlooking an immaculate lick of a beach, barbecue nights, steel drums and a great new spa.

RATES: From £465

coralreefbarbados.com



◀ NEVIS

FOUR SEASONS

Nevis remains one of the quieter, less spoilt islands of the Caribbean and there is nowhere more luxurious to stay than this newly licked-into-shape hideaway. You'll find the cosy Beach House for drinks, the new Coral Grill Restaurant and cocooning bedrooms with oversized bathrooms. There's also a kid's club with a great Sea Turtle Education Program.

RATES: From £486

fourseasons.com/nevis



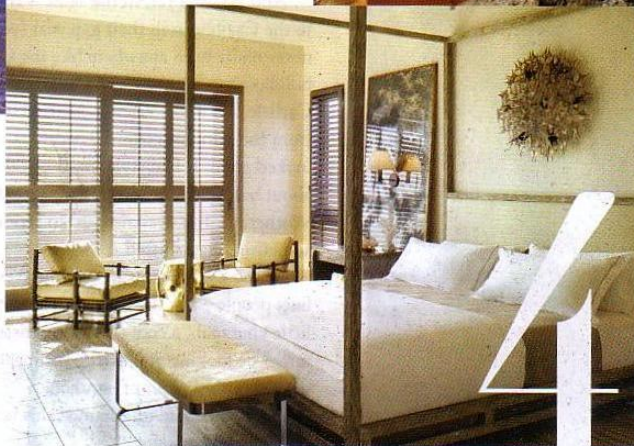
▶ ANGUILLA

THE VICEROY

The hottest new arrival in the the Caribbean. Bedrooms come with balconies and ocean views, outdoor stone hot tubs, and bathrooms that make you weep with jealousy. Don't miss a massage in one of the spa cabanas set around the infinity pool.

RATES: From £390

viceroypotelsandresorts.com/anguilla



▲ JAMAICA

JAKES

Simple, Robinson Crusoe chic. No wonder Jakes is an eternal groovy huo popular with the likes of Kate Moss. Bedrooms are housed in Cornish style fishing huts, there are hammocks dotted over grassy grounds and a magical salt water pool. Think romantic pirate hideaway with masses of time to chill.

RATES: From £60

islandoutpost.com