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FOR PREMIUM TRAVEL
PROFESSIONALS



FULL OF FLAVOUR

The Caribbean is definitely back in style, with a range of enviable new hotels and reopenings, exciting experiences to try and new flights to make getting there easier

Plus: China, Turkey, Tel Aviv, London, Marrakech, Tuscany, on location with Full Circle Travel, the secret of The Pig's success, how to revamp your store and reviews from around the world

Sand system

Just when you think the Caribbean is falling behind on the luxury scene, it offers up sleek new hotels, novel experiences and interesting events to lure in affluent travellers

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Last winter's *Billionaire's Paradise* TV documentary about Necker Island showed how the other 0.1% live and doubtless turned the thoughts of those who can afford it towards emulating this lifestyle, if only for a little while.

But the Caribbean also provides plenty of options for those who can't quite stretch to the £39,000 a night needed for Richard Branson's hideaway. And while alternative luxury destinations have emerged, the Caribbean will always have the edge in the UK market. The islands have their own attractions, but individual upscale properties have the power to lure clients in themselves, something

At a glance

ROUND-UP 47

Family focus, APD cut and hotel arrivals bode well

WITH A TWIST 49

How to add some spice to Caribbean getaways

MY CARIBBEAN 50

An agent's expert view

IN THE KNOW 56

Ideas and tips to help sell the most suitable holidays

ISLAND UPDATES 58

What you need to have on your radar





Hotel developers are well aware of.

Carol Hay, the Caribbean Tourism Organisation's UK and Europe marketing director, says: "Over the past few years there has been an increasing investment in luxury resorts, boutique villas and private properties opening across the Caribbean, with more set to open throughout 2015."

"Last year alone a number of luxury properties were launched or refurbished, including Grenada's Petit Anse and the Ocean Terrace Inn Resort in St Kitts."

Accommodation choice is of course important to luxury holidaymakers, but the unique experiences they won't find in the average holiday brochure are also paramount, Hay believes: "Luxury travellers want bespoke, understated luxury and to enjoy the lifestyle they have at home. This includes being able to partake in a yoga

class, enjoy a private dinner or go for a massage when they feel like it."

She adds that other issues important to luxury travellers in choosing the Caribbean include privacy and sustainable travel.

"Our members have responded positively to this by building, for example, the eco-resort Castara in Tobago, and by supporting sustainable initiatives, as Jakes Hotel in Jamaica does, while St Lucia's Ti Kaye Resort & Spa is on track to meet its 'carbon-neutral' goal," she highlights.

Properties and destinations such as these have a certain resilience to recession, but when economic circumstances improve, things really do well, operators say.

"The luxury sector is strong," says Azure Collection's product and marketing manager Paul Britchford. "January was a fantastic month and there has been a positive vibe from the agents we work with."

A sign of this strength, he added, was that sales were "much more spread out" and ranged from last-minute to 2016 festive bookings.

"What happened during the economically tight years was that people would spend later, now they are much happier to go back into the pattern of booking a lot more longer term. The interesting thing to watch will be the general election in May, because people tend to wait for the result before they spend," Britchford says.

Playing the field

This confidence signals a bounce back for the region, but the days of the Caribbean being the only luxury icon for aspirational travellers to strive towards are long gone.

Nowadays, the area has to compete with the likes of the Maldives, Mauritius and Dubai, all of which play high stakes in the luxury sector.

"These places

have invested huge amounts of money in hotels," says Nadine Rankin, managing director of tourism marketing company AMG. "But the Caribbean has been left behind because it has a lot of old stock and needs to invest in quality."

There is a flipside to this, according to the CTO's Hay, who reports growing interest in the Caribbean from Middle East and Russia – something that can only encourage the luxury sector to raise its game even further.

Tracy Hirsz, Travel 2 head of sales, believes however that investment by hoteliers is beginning to pay off.

"Customers that had been going to the Caribbean for a while started looking at destinations such as Asia that had a higher level of service and value, so the Caribbean had to up the game," says Hirsz. "Lots of hotels had been looking at their peer islands but now they are looking further afield. Spas are better and there is a lot more dining choice – there are fewer restrictions on all-inclusives, for example."

Hirsz says the brand's Simply Luxury by Travel 2 operation was 41% ahead year-on-year since July.

"Every single destination is performing well for us and we're seeing huge interest in booking over the summer because the family market is coming back," she adds.

It might be a small point for the luxury market, but family pricing will get slightly more attractive in April when Air Passenger Duty for the under-12s is abolished, followed next year by abolition of APD for under-16s.

Premium power

A key barometer of confidence in the luxury sector is when a mainstream brand moves more into it. Virgin Holidays is better known for its mid-scale properties, but Gaizka Fraser, the operator's product and purchasing director, says this is about to change.

"We are looking at our luxury position and we will be coming out with more product at the end of 2015," he says. "The focus is the premium plus market. For me the definition of luxury is £8,000-£25,000, a person with private planes, and so on, but that pot of people is quite small. Premium plus is more like £3,000 spend, and that is where the opportunity is."

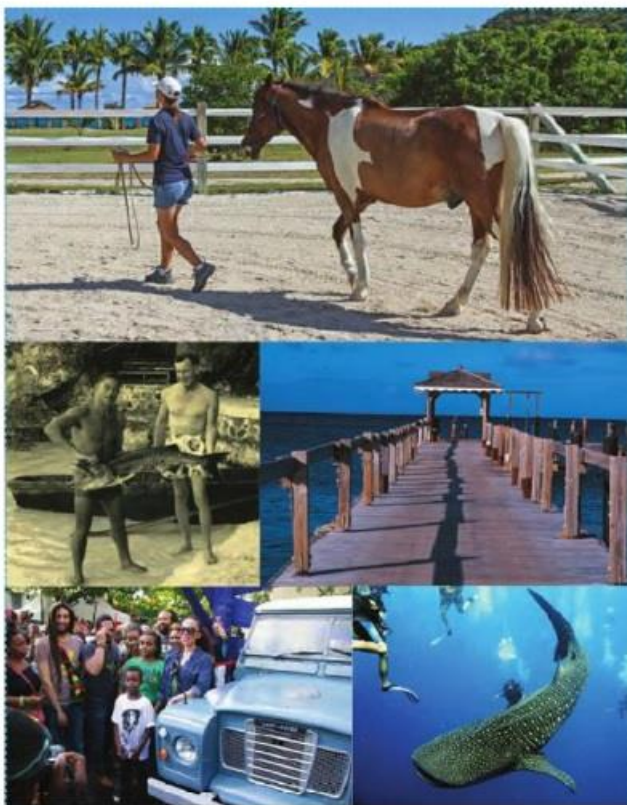
Fraser says the brand is planning a four-fold increase in its presence in the Caribbean to around 200 hotels, with an emphasis on the premium plus category.

Key destinations are also taking up the luxury challenge with St Lucia putting more emphasis on the upmarket sector this year.

"Luxury is not something we have really focused on before," says Atlyn Forde, UK and Europe marketing director for Saint Lucia Tourist Board.

The island ran its UK Luxury Roadshow in March and is publishing a dedicated luxury brochure. Meanwhile, a trade incentive with a brand such as Molton Brown or Mulberry was being sought for a promotion starting in May.

"We want to establish St Lucia as one of the



With a twist

(Pictured clockwise from main)

HORSING AROUND

Biras Creek in the British Virgin Islands offers the chance to spend time with Paso Fino rescue horses from Puerto Rico. Guests can visit the horses for a therapeutic grooming session. biras.com

DON'T PANIC, IT'S ORGANIC

Four Seasons Nevis has launched a Dive and Dine package as part of the group's Extraordinary Experiences. Guests don wetsuits to join a chef and a dive master to catch their own spiny lobster using a handmade lasso. Back on shore, the chef prepares a lobster feast and BBQ. fourseasons.com

WHALE OF A TIME

Suggest a trip to see whale sharks and a stay at Francis Ford Coppola's Turtle Inn in Belize. Whale Sharks are mostly seen during the full moon cycle (March 5-April 4 and again May 3-June 2). coppolareorts.com/turtleinn

DRIVE LIKE A LEGEND

In the year of what would have been Bob Marley's 70th birthday, Sandals Resorts International – along with Island Routes Caribbean Adventure Tours, and ATL Automotive and the Marley family – have restored his old Land Rover, now sitting at the museum in Kingston. An Island Routes Bob Marley and Kingston Highlights tour costs from \$145. islandroutes.co.uk. Seven nights at Sandals Grande Riviera Beach & Villa Golf Resort costs from £1,589pp. sellingsandals.co.uk

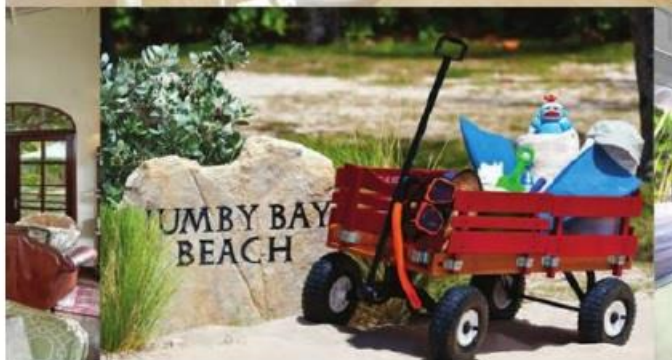
BE LIKE BOND

The new Bond film *Spectre* opens in October, so suggest a Following in the Footsteps of Fleming package at GoldenEye Hotel & Resort, home to The Fleming Villa, where novelist Ian Fleming penned all 14 of his Bond novels. A seven-night stay starts from £5,742pp. goldeneye.com

THE SPA TREATMENT

What? The exclusive Cheval Blanc St-Barth Isle de France became an official part of the LVMH-owned collection last year and the French touch is already even clearer, now that the hotel is home to the Caribbean's first Guerlain spa. The Cheval Blanc Spa has an idyllic garden setting with four new treatment rooms, and outdoor relaxation pavilion and hammam. Two signature Guerlain treatments have also been created exclusively for the hotel, including the St-Barth Solar Escape face and body treatment to soothe sun-blushed skin and Sun Energy for active guests – hot and cold compresses oxygenate the tissue, followed by massages that stimulate circulation and release tension. Guerlain's anti-aging Orchidee Imperiale facials are also on offer.

How to book it: Elegant Resorts has seven nights from £4,195pp including breakfast, international and inter-island flights, private car transfers and UK airport lounge passes, elegantresorts.co.uk



KIDS COME FIRST

What? At Cheval Blanc St Barth-Isle de France, kids can explore underwater shallows with a marine instructor and meet "Amaryllis the mermaid". Viceroy Anguilla's Generation V club (children ages 4-11) includes cookie and cupcake decorating, treasure hunts, beach Olympics, jewelry making and sand art. Teens can hang out in the low-key clubroom with media centre and magazine library. Azure picks Antigua for its direct flights and an efficient new airport as well as Jumby Bay, with its Rosebuds Kids' Club; Carlisle Bay's Cool Kids Club, mini-cinema and Crew Blue teenage programme; and Blue Waters new Kids' Club for 4-12 year olds in partnership with the World Wide Kids Company.

How to book it: Seven nights at Jumby Bay, A Rosewood Resort, with Azure Collection costs from £8,850 per family of three (all-inclusive) in a one-bedroom suite, including British Airways World Traveller flights and private resort transfers, azurecollection.com

STYLE SEEKERS

What? Carrier features the sleek Oil Nut Bay in the British Virgin Islands, with its Fendi designed penthouse; and also suggests Sugar Beach in St Lucia, home to the Cane Bar, one of the coolest bars in the Caribbean and with a resident rummeller. But one of the hottest new spots in the Caribbean is the reworked Le Guanahani (pictured) in St Barths which has just revealed the results of a \$40 million renovation by Miami-based designer Luis Pons. The vibrantly coloured creole-style cottages are backed up by a new website and on-trend rebrand, while French former model Estelle Lefebvre is implementing wellness programs and healthy menus for those seeking a detox kick as part of their holiday at the hotel.

How to book it: Carrier offers seven nights at Le Guanahani from £3,070pp including breakfast, flights with British Airways, onward connecting flights and transfers, carrier.co.uk