

Caribbean away from the crowds

From gliding through mangrove forests to feasting on grilled lobster, the island of Barbuda offers the ultimate tropical escape, writes **Michele Peterson**

The best way to appreciate Barbuda's unique beauty just might be from the air. I'm in the cockpit of an Airbus EC130 CalvinAir helicopter and, as pilot Mark Fleming tilts the controls, the island rushes toward us. It appears like a rainbow tourmaline, a crystalline speck of green forest fringed by white and pink sand, in a vast sea of blue.

Earlier in our 15-minute flight, we'd gawked at the posh resorts, marinas and sprawling villas of celebrities such as Eric Clapton, Oprah Winfrey and Giorgio Armani on Antigua.

In contrast, Barbuda appears almost deserted. Home to just 1,200 full-time residents and only 160 square kilometres in size, it's the smaller and less populated of the twin-island nation of Antigua and Barbuda. Codrington, its only town, has a population of just 100.

Its seclusion has long been much of its appeal. In the 1990s, Barbuda was a favourite getaway for Diana, Princess of Wales, and young princes William and Harry. Paparazzi anchored offshore with telephoto lenses aimed at the K Club, the now-shuttered resort where she escaped the limelight.

These days, a prime place to soak up some solitude is the Barbuda Belle, a boutique hotel accessible only by boat. It's also a symbol of the island's resilience. When Category 5 Hurricane Irma hit Barbuda in late 2017, more than 90 per cent of the island was

heavily damaged, including the luxury hotel. Rebuilding took more than a year.

Today, guests dine al fresco at the resort's new bar and grill, where specialties include spiny lobster and tuna tartare with Antigua black pineapple, a local variety known for its exceptional sweetness. Evenings, it's time to retreat to one of eight thatched wood bungalows, where king-size four-poster beds draped in billowy netting come equipped with built-in air conditioning.

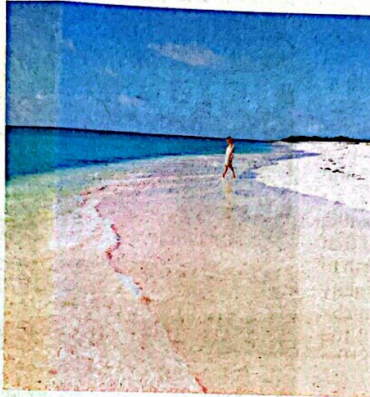
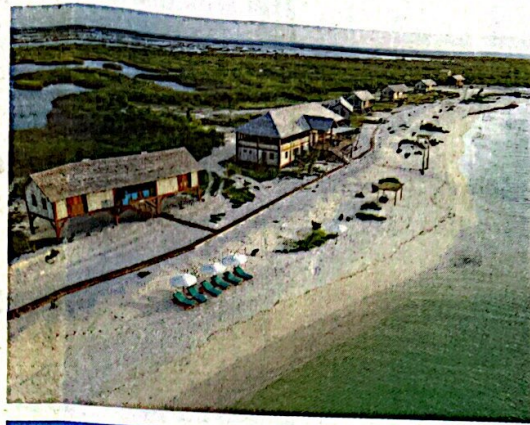
Things to do include snorkeling off rose-hued beaches or kayaking through nearby Codrington Lagoon National Park. This diverse ecosystem supports marine species such as reef fish, hawksbill and leatherback sea turtles, as well as nesting seabirds, including the largest magnificent frigatebird colony in the Caribbean. During mating season, male frigatebirds inflate their throat pouches into brilliant red balloons to attract the attention of females.

Further afield, at Two Foot Bay National Park on the northeastern coast, you can explore caves carved into cliffs and hike past ancient petroglyphs created by the Arawak indigenous peoples.

While there's no shortage of diversions, most visitors continue to be drawn to Barbuda for its tranquility.

This may all change soon. Barbuda is tapped as the next St. Barts, which is known as a playground for the rich and beautiful - Robert De Niro recently opened Nobu Barbuda, the latest addition to his restaurant empire - on Princess Diana Beach. And more development is on the horizon.

But for now, you're more likely to see wild donkeys and goats than celebrities on the island's sandy streets. There's still time to find an empty beach and catch the unique dance of light and colour that's quintessentially Barbuda.



Clockwise from top left: the Barbuda Belle hotel; Barbuda Belle's club house great room; Nobu Barbuda's outdoor dining area; a frigatebird inflates its throat pouch; one of the island's pink sand beaches.
 BARBUDA BELLE (BELLE), ANTIGUA & BARBUDA TOURISM AUTHORITY (BEACH), MICHELE PETERSON (NOBU, FRIGATEBIRD, GREAT ROOM)

IF YOU GO

Barbuda is accessible by ferry, direct scheduled flights and helicopter charter from Antigua. While most popular as a day trip destination, it's also possible to overnight at a hotel, guest house or cottage.

The Barbuda Belle is located on the west side of Barbuda near Cedar Tree Point between the beach and Codrington Lagoon. Open Nov. 1 to June 30, the property is fully solar-powered and features eight guest rooms in seven beach bungalows. It has two restaurants on-site. Boat transfer to the hotel from the dock in Codrington is included. From US\$890 a night; barbudabelle.com

Barbuda Express Ferry operates daily (90-minute travel time) and its Barbuda Day Tour (a guided tour of Codrington Village, the Frigate Bird Colony, the caves at Two Foot Bay, lunch and Princess Diana Beach) is available on Tuesdays and Thursdays at an extra cost. Adult fare is 240 East Caribbean Dollars (\$113) round trip. barbudaexpress.com

For further travel information and COVID-19 protocols, go to visitantiguabarbuda.com.

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