

Chapter 15

Landing in the Caribbean

In This Chapter

- ▶ Poking around the ports of embarkation
- ▶ Calling at the Caribbean's ports
- ▶ Enjoying the best excursions
- ▶ Exploring private islands

When most people think cruise, they think Caribbean, whether they mean to or not. It's almost creepy, like they've been programmed — and maybe they have. For a dog's age, the cruise industry focused laserlike on the region, and it's still the top cruise destination, for good reason. On the practical side, the Caribbean islands (and The Bahamas, which aren't technically on the Caribbean Sea but might as well be) are pretty much in Florida's backyard, and are so close to one another that it makes for easy sailing. On the unpractical side are white-sand beaches, swaying palms, clear turquoise waters, tropical fish, lush gardens, deep rain forests, waterfalls, mountains, rivers, and even volcanoes — plus rich Caribbean culture, spicy Caribbean food, European colonial history, and a big dollop of laid-back island living to top it all off. The multicultural history of the region creates a checkerboard blend, with the architecture, language, and customs of the Spanish, French, Dutch, Swedish, British, and Americans in their former (and current) colonies or possession. Pre-Columbian peoples, European explorers, pirates, and shipwrecked sailors all contributed to the stories behind numerous ruins, forts, churches, synagogues, historic homes, and museums.

Storming the Shore

Now granted, a lot of the islands are touristy, but often it's confined to the vicinity of the docks and other resort areas. If you tire of shopping for fine jewelry, local handicrafts, and duty-free items (or of tipping back the beers at an island bar), you can head to more isolated and frequently gorgeous spots along the coast or in the interior, either on your own or a shore excursion. In this chapter, we list a selection of the best excursions offered by cruise lines in all the ports.

Major sights on many of the islands are also perfectly accessible on your own, either on foot or with the aid of a taxi or other transportation. As is true everywhere, the cruise lines contract with local operators to run these tours, so you may be able to get the same trips cheaper by booking them yourself once you arrive. Of course, you may just want the ease of having the cruise line do it for you, figuring the extra few bucks they make off the top is worth it.

Shore excursions aren't what they used to be either. For every bland bus tour or mindless booze cruise, the cruise lines over the past few years have also been programming more and more active excursions, including rain forest hikes, mountain biking, golf, jungle canopy exploration, scuba, sport fishing, horseback riding, and more.



The prices listed in this chapter are based on 2005 rates and may be slightly higher in 2006.

Boarding Ship for the Caribbean

The main port cities for Caribbean cruises remain in Florida — Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Cape Canaveral/Cocoa Beach, and Tampa — plus San Juan (Puerto Rico). In recent years, though, cruises have been leaving from **alternative homeports** such as Galveston and Houston, Texas; Charleston, South Carolina; Norfolk, Virginia; Jacksonville, Florida; and even as far north as Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Beyond Puerto Rico, other Caribbean islands also serve as homeports, including St. Thomas and Barbados.

In this chapter, we cover the most heavily trafficked ports of embarkation for Caribbean cruises — Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Cape Canaveral/Cocoa Beach, Tampa, and Galveston — hitting the see-and-do highlights, whether you only have a few hours before or after your cruise or are planning an extra couple days. (Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans served as a popular port — and may again — but cleanup from the devastation could take months or even years.) The cruise lines typically offer pre- and post-cruise packages for hotels, sometimes with a rental car, admission to local attractions, and/or organized tours.

San Juan, which is a port of embarkation *and* a popular port of call, is covered in the ports of call section.

Miami

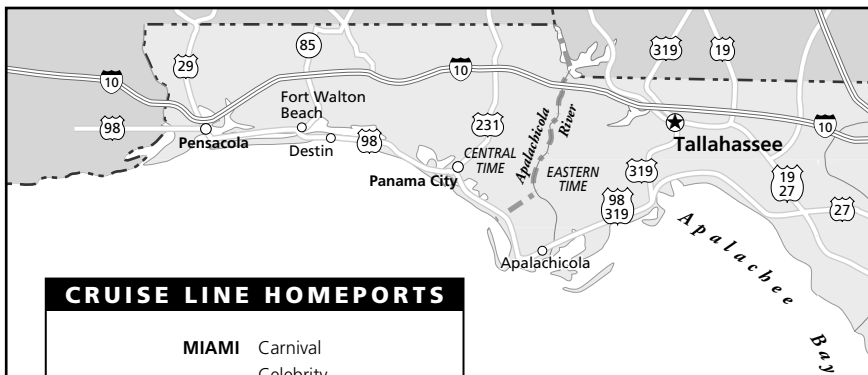
Maybe more than anyplace else in the U.S., Miami seems to embody the cultural mash-up of fashion, celebrity, design, and wealth that is America in 2006. It's the most Latin city in the country, with a stylin' club scene that's utterly replaced the retirement condo lifestyle that predominated in the 1970s. It's like the Rat Pack era has returned, only now it's got a Latino accent.

The Gulf of Mexico & the Caribbean





Florida Homeports



CRUISE LINE HOMEPORTS

- MIAMI** Carnival
 Celebrity
 Crystal
 Norwegian
 Oceania
 Royal Caribbean
 Silversea
 Windjammer

- FORT LAUDERDALE** Carnival
 Celebrity
 Costa
 Crystal
 Cunard
 Holland America
 MSC Cruises
 Princess
 Radisson
 Royal Caribbean
 Seabourn
 Silversea
 Windjammer

- CAPE CANAVERAL** Carnival
 Disney
 Royal Caribbean

- TAMPA** Carnival
 Celebrity
 Holland America
 Royal Caribbean

- JACKSONVILLE** ACCL
 Carnival
 Clipper

Tampa →

Gulf of Mexico

Of course, all the stuff that made Miami a resort destination in the first place is still there too: sparkling beaches, crystal clear waters, palm fronds, and that particularly Miami style of resort hotel, jutting up right from the beach's edge. And it's the undisputed cruise capital of the world, with nearly 4 million passengers embarking here annually.

Cruising into port

Miami International Airport (☎ 305-876-7000; www.miami-airport.com) is about 8 miles (or 15 minutes) west of downtown Miami and the port. If you've arranged air transportation and/or transfers through the cruise line, a cruise line rep directs you to shuttle buses to the port. Taxis are also available for a fare of about \$21 (plus tip) to the port. **SuperShuttle** (☎ 305-871-2000) charges \$12 per person to the port, with two pieces of luggage.

If you're arriving by car from the north, take I-95 to I-395 and head east on I-395, exiting at Biscayne Boulevard. Make a right and go south to Port Boulevard. Make a left and go over the Port Bridge. Coming in from the northwest, take Interstate 75 to State Road 826 (Palmetto Expwy.) south to State Road 836 east. Exit at Biscayne Boulevard. Make a right and go south to Port Boulevard. Make a left and go over the Port Bridge. Parking lots at street level face the cruise terminals. Parking runs \$12 per day.

A five-lane bridge from the downtown district of Miami provides access to the number-one cruise port in the world, the **Port of Miami** (1015 N. America Way; ☎ 305-371-7678; www.miamidade.gov/portofmiami). To accommodate the enormous amount of cruise traffic, a dozen bi-level terminals offer easy car access (as you're coming) and quick Customs clearance (as you're going).

Scoring the best excursions

Everglades Airboat Ride: The Seminole Indians called the Everglades *Pahay Okee*, the "grassy water," and on this 40-minute airboat ride you get to see some of the area's indigenous wildlife, including water birds and American alligators (4 hours; \$45).

Exploring on your own

You probably need a taxi to hit most of the attractions in Miami.

Go to the beach! You can beachcomb along 10 miles of glorious sand and surf between the south of **Miami Beach** and **Haulover Beach Park** at the north end. Behind the surf, South Beach's renowned **Art Deco district** spreads out over a full square mile. All in all, it's the largest concentration of 1920s and 1930s resort architecture in the U.S. The district stretches from 6th to 23rd streets, and from the Atlantic Ocean to Lennox Court. Ocean Drive boasts many premier Art Deco hotels, while other buildings house chic shops, clubs, restaurants, and cafes.

Miami at a Glance



Near the port, **Bayside Marketplace** (401 Biscayne Blvd.; ☎ 305-577-3344; www.baysidemarketplace.com) is a vibrant shopping and entertainment complex with many bayside restaurants and cafes offering outdoor seating, plus live musicians in the evenings. Regular shuttle service is available from the port, or you can walk over the Port Bridge.

If oil paintings turn you on more than tanning oil, the **Bass Museum of Art** (2121 Park Ave.; ☎ 305-673-7530; www.bassmuseum.org) houses old masters and then some. Admission is \$6. Farther afield, the 70-room Italian Renaissance-style villa now known as **Vizcaya Museum & Gardens** (3251 S. Miami Ave., Coconut Grove; ☎ 305-250-9133; www.vizcayamuseum.com) has been called “the Hearst Castle of the East.” Industrialist James Deering employed more than a thousand artisans and laborers from Europe and the Caribbean to build his dream house, which was completed in 1916 but designed to look as if it had stood for centuries. Inside, you can visit 42 rooms filled with furniture, paintings, sculpture, tapestries, wall panels, and decorative arts brought from Europe by Deering and his designers. Admission to the villa and gardens is \$12. It’s about a mile from downtown Miami.



Take the kids to the **Miami Children’s Museum** (980 MacArthur Causeway; ☎ 305-373-KIDS; www.miamichildrensmuseum.org), which offers hundreds of interactive exhibits plus programs, classes, and learning materials related to arts, culture, community, and communication, including a mock TV studio, a music studio that exposes kids to music from other cultures, and (how Miami!) a mini Carnival cruise ship where kids see how a ship works, from navigating to limbo dancing. Admission is \$10; kids under 12 months free.



Across the MacArthur Causeway from the kids’ museum, 19-acre **Parrot Jungle Island** (1111 Parrot Jungle Trail; ☎ 305-2-Jungle; www.parrotjungle.com) features an Everglades exhibit, a petting zoo, and several theaters, jungle trails, and aviaries. Hundreds of parrots, macaws, peacocks, cockatoos, and flamingos fly overhead, while the Serpentarium houses the park’s reptile and amphibian collection, including a 20-foot long saltwater crocodile. Eek! Continuous shows star roller-skating cockatoos, card-playing macaws, and stunt-happy parrots. Admission is \$24.95 adults, \$19.95 kids 3 to 10, free under 3.

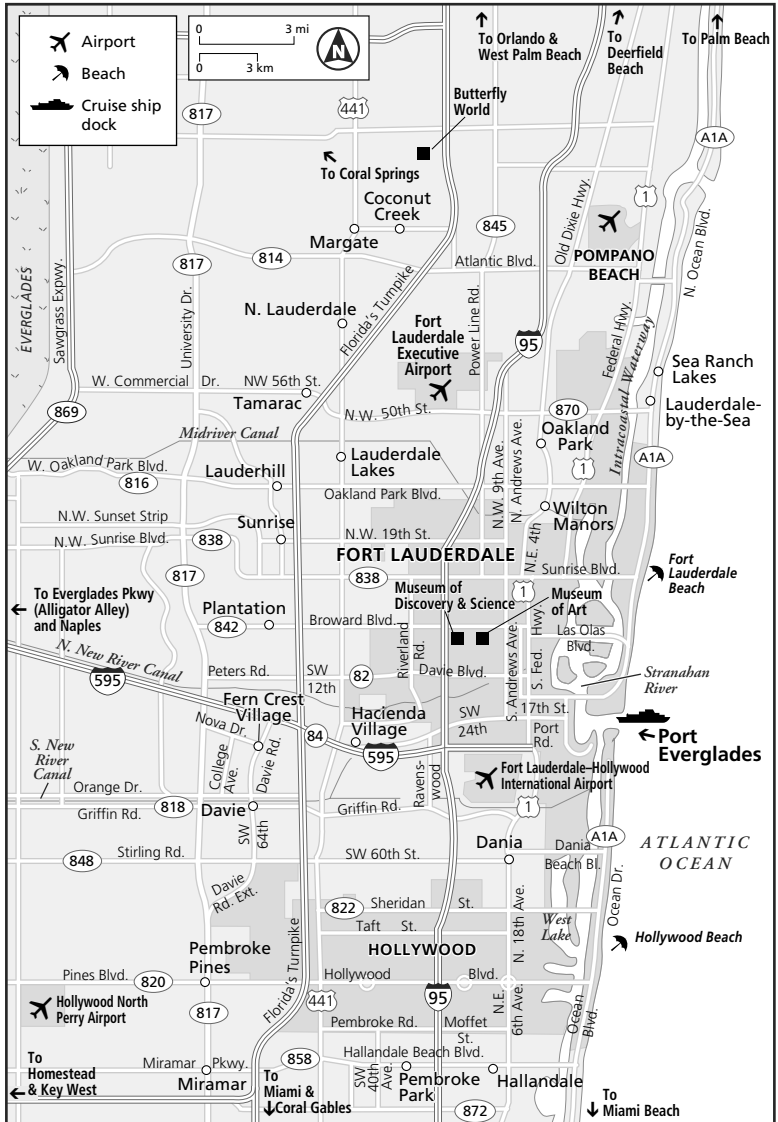


To see sea critters in action, head to the **Miami Seaquarium** (4400 Rickenbacker Causeway, Key Biscayne; ☎ 305-361-5705; www.miamiseaquarium.com), where Flipper, TV’s greatest sea mammal, performs along with Lolita the Killer Whale. You can also see endangered manatees, sea lions, tropical-theme aquariums, and a gruesome shark feeding. Admission is \$26 adults, \$21 kids.

Fort Lauderdale

Fort Lauderdale’s **Port Everglades** is nearly as busy as the Port of Miami, drawing more than 3.5 million cruise passengers a year. It boasts the deepest harbor on the eastern seaboard south of Norfolk, 12

Fort Lauderdale at a Glance



ultramodern cruise terminals, and easy access to the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. Unlike Miami, though, Port Everglades doesn't offer much nearby activity — just comfortable cruise terminals with snack bars and seating areas.

Fort Lauderdale and its well-known strip of beaches, restaurants, bars, and souvenir shops was once infamous for the annual mayhem that

descended every spring break, but yesterday's students have been replaced by a far more affluent and definitely quieter yachting crowd. Boating isn't just a hobby here; it's a lifestyle, with more than 300 miles of navigable waterways and innumerable canals criss-crossing this city called "The Venice of America." Visitors can easily get on the water too by grabbing one of the **water taxis** (☎ 954-467-6677; www.watertaxi.com), which sail between Oakland Park Boulevard and Southeast 17th Street along the Intracoastal Waterway, and west along the New River into downtown Fort Lauderdale. All-day passes are \$5.

Cruising into port

Port Everglades (☎ 954-523-3404) is located on State Road 84, east of U.S. 1, about a 2-mile/5-minute drive from the **Fort Lauderdale—Hollywood International Airport**. It's the easiest airport-to-cruise port trip in Florida. If you've booked air or transfers through the cruise line, a representative shows you to your shuttle after you land. If you haven't, taking a taxi costs less than \$10 to the port or \$12 to the city. If you're driving to Port Everglades, you enter via Spangler Boulevard, Eisenhower Boulevard, or Eller Drive. Parking is available in two large garages for \$12 a day.

Scoring the best excursions

Everglades Airboat Ride: A longer version of this tour that we discuss in the preceding "Miami" section also visits the Flamingo Gardens and Wildlife Sanctuary, an old homestead that now houses a free-flight aviary (2½ hours; \$36–\$48).

Exploring on your own

You need transportation (taxi or otherwise) to get around Fort Lauderdale.

Backed by an endless row of hotels, the **Fort Lauderdale Beach** is located along Fort Lauderdale Beach Boulevard between SE 17th Street and Sunrise Boulevard. The **Fort Lauderdale Beach Promenade** is ideal for rollerblading, biking, or just strolling.



In the walk-through, screened-in aviary at **Butterfly World** (Tradewinds Park South, 3600 W. Sample Rd., Coconut Creek, west of the Florida Turnpike; ☎ 954-977-4400; www.butterflyworld.com), visitors can see 150 different varieties of the colorful insects performing butterfly ballet all summer long. Admission is \$17.95 adults, \$12.95 kids 4 to 12, free for kids 3 and under. In downtown Fort Lauderdale, the **Museum of Discovery & Science** (401 SW Second St.; ☎ 954-467-6637; www.mods.org) is an excellent interactive science museum with an IMAX theater and more than a dozen themed, hands-on exhibitions. Admission for both IMAX and exhibits is \$14 adults, \$12 kids 3 to 12, free for 2 and under.

The **Museum of Art** (downtown at 1 E. Las Olas Blvd.; ☎ 954-763-6464; www.moaf1.org) is a terrific small museum with a permanent collection of 20th-century European and American art that includes works by

Picasso, Calder, Warhol, Mapplethorpe, and Dalí. African, South Pacific, pre-Columbian, Native American, and Cuban art are also on display. Admission is \$7; closed Mondays.

Cape Canaveral/Cocoa Beach

Known as the “Space Coast” because of nearby Kennedy Space Center, the Cape Canaveral/Cocoa Beach/Melbourne area is really anything but space-age looking. Stretched out along 72 miles of beachfront, it’s primarily a string of hotels, malls, and suburban homes on little side streets (one of them called “I Dream of Jeannie Lane,” in honor of the old TV show set in Cocoa Beach). Because the area is only about an hour west of Orlando’s theme parks, it’s become a major port of embarkation for cruise ships, especially ones offering 3- and 4-night cruises that can be paired with 4- and 3-night stays at the Orlando resorts, to make a full week’s vacation.

Once fairly quiet, the port got a big boost when Disney Cruise Line started up, building a gorgeous new port facility in 1998. Both of Disney’s ships are normally based here year-round. Recently, the area has also begun to benefit from the industry trend of homeporting cruise ships in northerly cities and running them down the coast to The Bahamas. NCL’s *Norwegian Dawn*, for example, includes Port Canaveral as a stop on her weekly round-trip Florida/Bahamas cruises from New York, giving passengers access to Orlando and to the Space Center’s visitors complex.

Cruising into port

Port Canaveral is located at the eastern end of the Bennett Causeway, just off State Road 528 (the Bee Line Expwy.), the direct route from **Orlando International**, the nearest airport, about 45 minutes away. Cruise line representatives meet you if you’ve booked air and/or transfers through the line. If not, the **Cocoa Beach Shuttle** (☎ 800-633-0427 or 321-784-3831) offers shuttle service for \$27 per person each way. By car, the area is accessible from virtually every interstate highway along the East Coast. Most visitors arrive via Route 1, Interstate 95, or S.R. 528. Parking at the port costs \$10 a day.

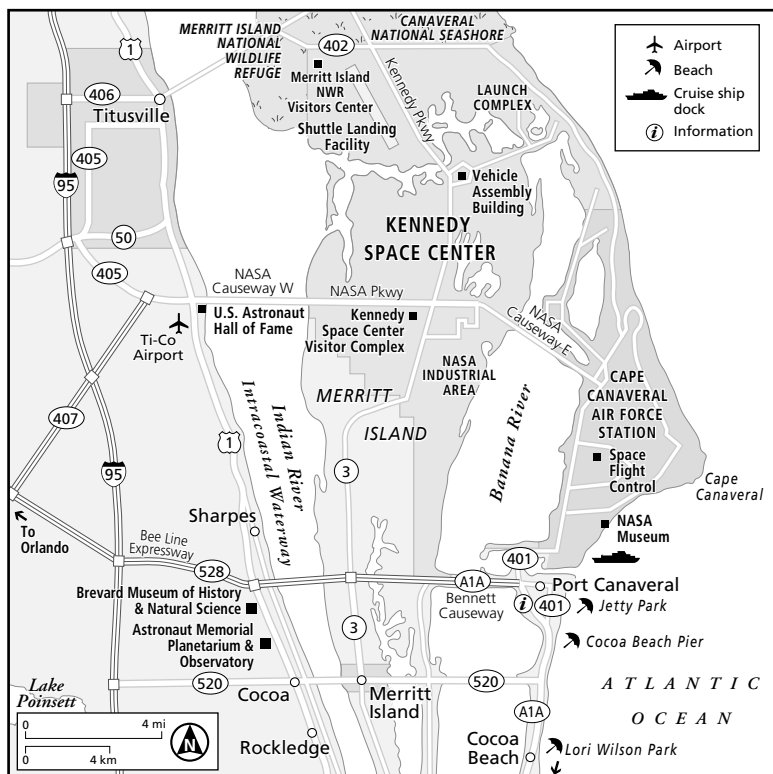
Exploring on your own

You need a car or taxis to explore the area, which is very spread out.



Although some folks prefer to dash over to Disney World or Universal Studios, we’re bigger fans of the **John F. Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex** (State Road 405 E., Titusville; ☎ 321-449-4444; www.kennedy.spacecenter.com), home to American space flight since the unmanned Bumper 8 research rocket launch in 1950. The complex has real NASA rockets, the actual Mercury Mission Control Room from the 1960s, and exhibits and films (including IMAX) that look at space exploration from the 1950s to today. Tours explore various parts of the huge space center complex, with the complimentary hop-on/hop-off bus tour taking in the **LC-39 Observation Gantry** (with a view of where the space shuttles lift

Cape Canaveral at a Glance



off) and the impressive **Apollo/Saturn V Center**, which includes artifacts, photos, interactive exhibits, and an actual 363-foot **Saturn V rocket**. Buses for this tour operate continuously, leaving every 15 minutes from the visitor center. Extra-cost tours allow you to visit parts of the space center where rockets and shuttles are prepared and launched. Down the road from the visitor complex, near the intersection of Routes 1 and 405, the **U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame** has an extraordinary museum of space history, and several simulator rides that let you experience high G-forces, weightlessness, and the ups and downs of space flight. Admission (including all exhibits, Astronaut Encounter, IMAX space films, the KSC tour, and the Astronaut Hall of Fame) is \$34 adults, \$24 kids 3 to 11, free for kids under 3. Note that the last tour departs at 2:15 p.m. from the visitor complex, so get there early and spend the day — it will take that long to see everything.

If you prefer hanging out at the beach, you have a lot to choose from. Right near the port, **Jetty Park** (400 E. Jetty Rd; ☎ 321-783-7111) is the most elaborate and best-landscaped of the local beaches, with picnic

areas, a snack bar, bathrooms, showers, a children's playground, and fishing available. Farther along the A1A, at Meade Avenue, the **Cocoa Beach Pier** is more of a partying spot, with volleyball, surfing, and an open-air bar. **Lori Wilson Park**, farther south at 1500 N. Atlantic Ave., is another nicely landscaped area with bathrooms and showers, and a rustic boardwalk with shaded picnic areas and benches.

Tampa

On the other side of Florida from the rest of the cruise ports, Tampa was a sleepy little town until Cuban immigrants began arriving in the 1880s and founded the local cigar industry. A few years later, magnate Henry B. Plant put Tampa on the tourist map by building a railroad into town. Teddy Roosevelt trained his Rough Riders here during the Spanish-American War, and various economic booms gave the city both its charming, Victorian-style Hyde Park suburb and its towering downtown skyline. The seaport area is under redevelopment, with the **Florida Aquarium** and the **Garrison Seaport Center** (a 30-acre complex of shops, restaurants, and entertainment, including an IMAX theater) being joined by office buildings, apartment complexes, and another major shopping/dining/entertainment center called **Channelside**.

On the western shore of Tampa Bay, St. Petersburg is the picturesque and pleasant flip side of Tampa's busy busy-ness. Originally conceived and built primarily for tourists and wintering snowbirds, it's got a nice downtown area, some quality museums, and a few good restaurants.

More than 810,000 passengers head out to sea from Tampa annually. Ships sailing from here head primarily to the western Caribbean, Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, and Central America.

Cruising into port

The Port of Tampa is set amid a complicated network of channels and harbors near the historic Cuban enclave of Ybor City and its deep-water Ybor Channel. The cruise terminals are all located along Channelside Drive, close to the heart of things. If you're flying, you'll probably arrive at **Tampa International Airport**, approximately 5 miles from downtown near the junction of Florida 60 and Memorial Highway. If you haven't arranged transfers with the cruise line, the port is an easy 30-minute taxi ride away, with a set fare of \$20 per car for up to four people. By car, all roads — or at least I-275, I-75, I-4, U.S. 41, U.S. 92, and U.S. 301 — lead to Tampa. Parking at the port is \$12 per day.

Scoring the best excursions

Tampa City Tour: A bus-tour overview of Tampa, with 90 minutes in Ybor City (including the Ybor State Museum), and visits to the University of Tampa, opulent Bayshore Drive, and Hyde Park (4 hours; \$34).

Exploring on your own

Tampa is best explored by car, as only the commercial district can be covered on foot. Most interesting, culturally, is the old Latin enclave of **Ybor City**, located about a mile from the docks. Once known as the cigar capital of the world and now one of three national historic districts in Florida, it offers Spanish architecture, antique street lamps, cigar shops, boutiques, nightclubs, and great Cuban food. Most restaurants are spread out along 7th Avenue, the main artery, which is closed to traffic at night. The **Ybor City Museum State Park** (1818 9th Ave., between 18th and 19th streets; ☎ **813-247-6323**; www.ybormuseum.org) has displays on the area's cigar history. Admission is \$3.

You can get a glimpse of another culture — the Gilded Age tourist kind — at the **Henry B. Plant Museum** (401 W. Kennedy Blvd.; ☎ **813-254-1891**; www.plantmuseum.com), easily identified on the Tampa skyline by its 13 silver minarets and distinctive Moorish architecture. It opened in 1891 as the Tampa Bay Hotel, a magnet for wintering society types; it's now filled with European and Oriental furnishings and decorative arts from the original hotel collection. Admission is \$5; closed Mondays. The permanent collection of the **Tampa Museum of Art** (600 N. Ashley Dr.; ☎ **813-274-8732**; www.tampamuseum.com) is especially strong in ancient Greek, Etruscan, and Roman artifacts, as well as 20th-century art. The museum grounds, fronting the Hillsborough River, contain a sculpture garden and a decorative fountain. Admission is \$7; closed Mondays.



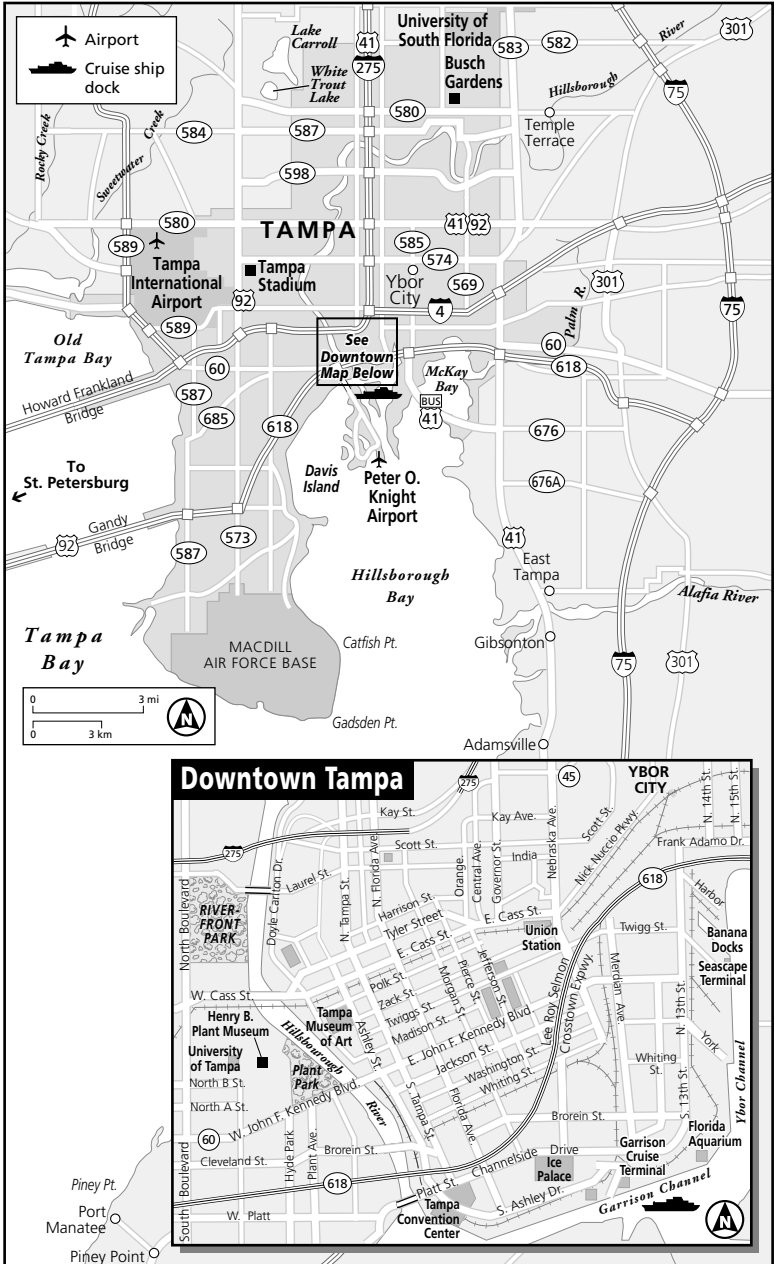
Kid-friendly but not wallet-friendly, **Busch Gardens and Adventure Island** (3605 E. Bougainville Ave., north of downtown; ☎ **888-800-5447**; www.buschgardens.com) is still Tampa Bay's most popular attraction, offering thrill rides, themed "lands" (including Egypt, Timbuktu, Morocco, and the Congo), live entertainment, shops, restaurants, games, and a zoo with nearly 3,400 animals and numerous animal habitats. Admission is reeeeeaaaaalllly high: \$56 for adults, \$50 for kids 3 to 9, free for kids 2 and under. Oh, and there's a 7 percent tax on top of that, and parking costs \$7.



Near the docks, the **Florida Aquarium** (701 Channelside Dr.; ☎ **813-273-4000**; www.flaquarium.org) displays more than 10,000 aquatic plants and animals in a state-of-the-art setting.

If you want to go to the beach, you have to head to neighboring St. Petersburg, which has a north-to-south string of interconnected white sandy shores. While you're there, grab a skein of surrealism at the **Salvador Dalí Museum** (1000 Third St. S., St. Petersburg; ☎ **727-823-3767**; www.salvadoralimuseum.org), which contains the world's largest collection of Dalí's work, including 95 oil paintings; more than 100 watercolors and drawings; and 1,300 sketches, sculptures, photographs, and objects d'art.

Tampa at a Glance



Galveston

Galveston was one of the first ports to which the cruise industry spread when it decided Florida just wasn't enough anymore. Located on a 30-by-2-mile barrier island off the Texas mainland, it's an ideal port from which to sail for the western Caribbean, letting ships reach open sea quickly and be on their way.

The port city's main attractions are its historic districts, full of Victorian architecture, and its beaches, which draw crowds of Houstonians and other Texans during the summer.

Cruising into port

The **Texas Cruise Ship Terminal** at the Port of Galveston (**☎ 409-766-6113**; www.portofgalveston.com) is at Harborside Drive and 25th Street, on Galveston Island. It's reached via I-45 south from Houston. If you're flying in, you'll land at one of two Houston airports: **William P. Hobby Airport** (south of downtown Houston, and about 31 miles, or a 45-minute drive, from the terminal) or **George Bush Intercontinental Airport** (just north of downtown Houston, and about 54 miles, or an 80-min. drive, from the terminal). Information on both is available at the Houston Airport System Web site, www.houstonairportsystem.org.

If you've arranged air transportation and/or transfers through the cruise line, a representative directs you to shuttle buses that take you to the port. Taxis are also available, but the price is steep: about \$80 per carload from Hobby or \$125 from Bush. If you're driving to the port, I-45 is the main artery for those arriving from the north. To get to the terminal, follow I-45 South to Exit 1C (at Harborside Dr./Hwy. 275); it's the first exit after the causeway. Turn left (east) onto Harborside Drive and continue for about 5 miles to the cruise terminal. Parking rates are based on length of cruise, with 4-day prices starting at \$45.

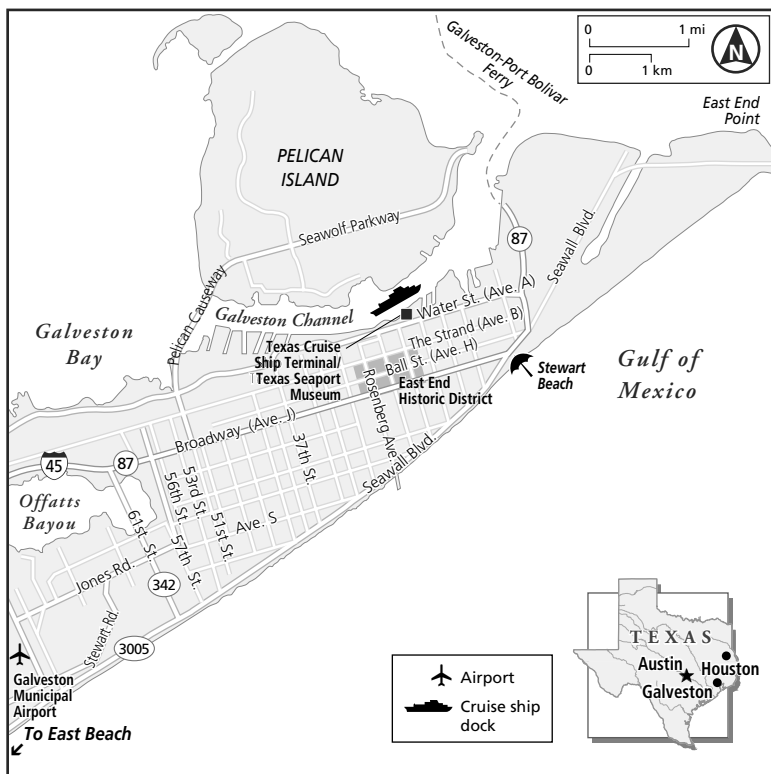
Scoring the best excursions

City Tour: This basic bus tour visits the historic Strand District before heading on to Houston's downtown theater and museum districts, Hermann Park (home to the Houston Zoo), and River Oaks, Houston's most prestigious residential neighborhood. The tour ends at the airport, making it easy for departing passengers (3½ hours; \$47).

Exploring on your own

If you've only got a few hours before you have to board your cruise, focus on the **Strand National Historic Landmark District**, the heart of commercial Galveston in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and just steps from the cruise terminals, running from 19th to 25th Streets between Church Street and the piers. Galveston was a booming commercial port back when cotton was king, and the Strand was its Wall Street. Today, its restored three- and four-story buildings, many with decorative ironwork facades, house shopping and dining.

Galveston at a Glance



The **East End Historic District** is Galveston's old silk-stocking neighborhood, running from 9th to 19th Streets between Broadway and Church Street. It has many lovely houses that have been completely restored. Three large mansions-turned-museums have regular tours: **Ashton Villa** (2328 Broadway; ☎ 409-762-3933; www.galvestonhistory.com); the **Moody Mansion** (2618 Broadway; ☎ 409-762-7668); and the **Bishop's Palace** (1402 Broadway; ☎ 409-762-2475), the most interesting of the bunch. Admission to each is \$6.



For a different take on cruising before you head out on your megaship, visit the *Elissa*, a three-masted, iron-hulled sailing ship built in 1877 and now the main attraction at the **Texas Seaport Museum** (Pier 21, ☎ 409-763-1877; www.tsm-elissa.org). Admission is \$6 adults, \$4 kids 7 to 18, free ages 6 and under.

While Galveston's beaches may not be as great as, say, Miami's, a good beach is better than no beach at all. **East Beach** and **Stewart Beach** both have pavilions with dressing rooms, showers, and restrooms, and are

good for day-trippers. Stewart Beach is located at the end of Broadway, and East Beach is about a mile east of Stewart Beach. Locals and visitors alike also enjoy walking, skating, or biking along Seawall Boulevard, built after the giant September 1900 storm that killed 6,000 of the island's residents — one out of every six. The Seawall stretches for 10 miles along Galveston's shoreline from its eastern edge, providing a kind of low-key boardwalk atmosphere.

New Orleans

On August 29, 2005, just as this book was going to press, Hurricane Katrina smashed into New Orleans, flooding the city and causing catastrophic damage. At this writing, the human toll was still unknown, as were losses to the city's historical and cultural patrimony. Cleanup will take months, if not years. The authors and editors of this book would like to express their condolences to the families and friends of all those who were lost. Our hearts go out to all those struggling still with the storm's aftermath.

The Ports of Call

This section details most of the Caribbean islands visited by cruise ships, as well as some popular ports in the Florida Keys, The Bahamas, and Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula.

Antigua

Antigua (an-tee-gah) is the largest of the British Leeward Islands, once the home to Britain's most important Caribbean naval base (Nelson's Dockyard) and now mostly the home of warm tradewinds, powder-white sand beaches, scuba-friendly coral reefs, and about 68,000 Antiguans. St. John's, the island's capital and main town, is a quiet place full of cobblestone sidewalks and weather-beaten wooden houses. Close to port, you can shop in restored warehouses. Away from town, the rolling, rustic island boasts important historic sites and a laid-back vibe.

The language here in **English**. The **Eastern Caribbean dollar** (EC\$2.72 = US\$1; EC\$1 = US37¢) is Antigua's official currency, but the U.S. dollar is accepted everywhere.

Cruising into port

Most cruise ships dock at the **Nevis Street Pier** or **Heritage Quay** (pronounced "key"), both located in St. John's, the island's only town of any size. From there, you can either walk or take a short taxi ride into town. A handful of smaller vessels drop anchor at **English Harbour**, near Nelson's Dockyard on the south coast.

Scoring the best excursions

Nelson's Dockyard National Park Tour: After heading across the island, you'll visit the site of the planet's last surviving, working

Antigua



Georgian dockyard, with original colonial structures including forts, residences, and barracks (3–4½ hours; \$46–\$59).

Helicopter to Montserrat Volcano: In December 1997, the Soufriere Hills Volcano on the nearby island of Montserrat erupted, burying much of the island in lava. This trip takes you over both the volcano and the lunar highlights of Montserrat's exclusion zone, the area declared off-limits to ground transportation (2 hours; \$240–\$261).

Off Road 4×4 Jeep Safari Adventure: Tour the island's only remaining rain forest via a four-wheel-drive vehicle, and stop at the ruins of forts, sugar mills, and plantation houses. The excursion includes beach time (3½–4 hours; \$52–\$67).

Hiking Safari Adventure: This 4-mile uphill/downhill hike takes you through Antigua's rain forest and up to a 1,200-foot lookout for panoramic views (3 hours; \$49).

Exploring on your own

Most of the major attractions here are beyond walking distance. **Taxis** meet every cruise ship, and taxi drivers are qualified tour guides, charging fixed fares of around \$20 per hour for sightseeing trips (for up to four people, with a 2-hour minimum). For a scenic 20-mile circular route across Antigua's main mountain range, ask your driver to take you along the steep and sometimes bumpy **Fig Tree Drive** for fantastic views of tropical forests and fishing villages. In the local lingo, *fig tree* actually means *banana tree*.

You can find the **Antigua and Barbuda Department of Tourism** at Nevis Street and Friendly Alley in St. John's.

Within walking distance: Apart from duty-free shopping close to the docks at Heritage Quay and Redcliffe Quay, St. John's itself is a little rusty, attractions-wise. Near the main docks, at the intersection of Market and Long Streets, the old 1750s Court House building now contains the **Museum of Antigua and Barbuda** (☎ 268-462-1469; www.antiguamuseums.org), which traces the nation's history from its geological birth to the present day. Admission is free, but a donation of \$3 is requested. Closed Sundays. While you're there, pick up one of the two brochures that detail a self-guided walking tour past the historic buildings along **Redcliffe Quay**, one of the oldest parts of town, with restored, Pez-colored Georgian buildings. Once a trade center for slaves, rum, sugar, and coffee, it now has a yacht marina, cafes, and boutiques. Top off the tour with a rum punch at **Redcliffe Tavern**. A couple of blocks uphill from the museum, **St. John's Anglican Cathedral** (between Long and Newgate Streets at Church Street) dominates St. John's skyline with its twin spires. The current cathedral was built in 1847, replacing an earlier structure lost to an earthquake. The whole interior is paneled in pitch pine.

If your ship is in town on a Friday or Saturday morning, the market at the lower end of Market Street gives a little taste of the local lifestyle, with residents bartering goods and gossip.

Beyond walking distance: From St. John's, take an excursion or taxi 11 miles to **Nelson's Dockyard National Park** (☎ 268-460-1379; www.antiguamuseums.org), once headquarters to British Admiral Horatio Nelson (1784–87) and now one of the most historic sites in the eastern Caribbean. At the heart of this landmark is the **Dockyard Museum**, where you discover the facility's links to the era of privateers, pirates, and great sea battles. A number of other historic structures are dotted around the park, as well as numerous artifacts related to 17th- and 18th-century maritime life, and even some sailors' graffiti dating back to the 1740s. The park grounds are well worth exploring, full of sandy beaches, tropical vegetation, and a number of nature trails, which can take anywhere from 30 minutes to five hours to explore. Admission to the whole park is \$5. Free guided tours last 15 to 20 minutes.

Uphill and east of the Dockyard, the **Dows Hill Interpretation Center** (☎ 268-481-5045) is part of the Shirley Heights military complex, which

dates to the mid-18th century. It features a multimedia review of Antigua's history, from the British military occupation to the island's role in the slave trade. Admission is \$5 for adults, free for children under 12. Continue up the hill to see a number of other military structures and the **Shirley Heights Lookout**, once the main signal station used to warn of approaching bad guys, now just a great view of the harbor below and the French island of Guadeloupe in the distance.

You can reach the best beaches by taxi, but remember to arrange for your driver to pick you up later so that you don't get stranded. **Fort James Beach** is the closest to St. John's, about 5 minutes (\$7 by taxi) from the cruise dock. It's popular with both locals and tourists, and often has games of volleyball and cricket going on, plus umbrellas and beach chairs for rent. Just a little farther north (a \$10 cab ride away), **Runaway Bay** and **Dickenson Bay** are the island's busiest beaches, with numerous resort hotels, restaurants, and watersports vendors. The water is calm, and chairs and umbrellas are available for rent. If you crave complete peace and quiet, head to **Half Moon Bay**, which is as far as you can get from St. John's and still be in Antigua.

Aruba

Way down in the southernmost southern Caribbean, Aruba is one of the so-called ABC islands — Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao — that lie just 20 miles or so off the South American coast. Blessed with perpetually sunny skies (annual rainfall is only 17 inches), warm temperatures, and cool breezes, the island also has some of the best beaches in the Caribbean, plus great snorkeling, scuba diving, windsurfing, and pretty much anything else you can do on the water. Inland, all that dryness means a stark landscape full of cacti and iguanas.

The island is legally part of the Netherlands, so expect a Dutch feel. Oranjestad, the island's capital and the location of the cruise docks, has Dutch- and Spanish-influenced architecture (the latter owing to the proximity of Venezuela), great shopping, casinos, restaurants, bars, and yachting marinas, many right along **Lloyd G. Smith Boulevard**, the main drag, which runs along the waterfront.

The official language is **Dutch**, but nearly everybody speaks English. You also hear Spanish and Papiamentu, a regional dialect that combines Dutch, Spanish, and English with Amerindian and African words. The **Aruba florin** (AFI) is the official currency (1.77 AFI = US\$1; 1 AFI = US56¢), but U.S. dollars are as widely accepted.

Cruising into port

Cruise ships arrive at the **Aruba Port Authority**, a modern terminal on the island's southern coast, in the capital city of Oranjestad. From the pier, it's a five-minute walk to the downtown shopping districts.

Scoring the best excursions

In addition to the tours described here, cruise lines typically offer about a dozen snorkeling, diving, sailing, and other water-oriented tours.

Off-Road Jeep Adventure: If you like the idea of exploring the island by four-wheel-drive but don't want to go it alone, this tour puts you in a convoy of other like-minded souls. A guide stays in touch with you by radio, and schedules a stop for lunch and swimming (4½–5 hours; \$65–\$74).

Mountain Biking on the North Coast: Bike along 10 miles of Aruba's wild north coast, visiting a gold mine, a natural bridge cut by the sea and wind, the little Alto Vista Chapel (dating to 1750), and the California Lighthouse at the island's northwesternmost point (3½ hours; \$47).

Aruba Bar and Pub Crawl: What you're doing here, basically, is paying for a designated driver, who'll shuttle you to five local pubs (in the capital, on the coast, and in the countryside), with one free drink included at each (4 hours; \$52).

Atlantis Submarine Adventure: Cruise 150 feet below the ocean in a submarine to see coral reefs, shipwrecks, and hundreds of curious tropical fish (1½ hours; \$89).

Exploring on your own

Shopping, a couple casinos, and a few museums are within walking distance of the port. To get to anything else you need wheels. **Taxis** line up at the dock and operate on a fixed-fare basis, with every driver carrying a copy of the official rate schedule (to the beach resorts, it's generally \$8–\$10). For about \$35, you can book a one-hour taxi tour for up to four people at the dispatch office (☎ 297-8-22116) in Oranjestad on Sands Street between the bowling alley and Taco Bell. Another option is riding the **bus**, which stops across the street from the cruise terminal (on L. G. Smith Boulevard) and takes you to the casinos, hotel resorts, and beaches of Aruba's west coast. Fares are inexpensive — about \$2 round-trip.

Excellent roads connect major tourist attractions, so many people rent **mopeds** (for about \$30–\$40 a day). You can get further information on rentals at the cruise terminal or at the many bike shops on Lloyd G. Smith Boulevard. You can also **rent a car** or four-wheel-drive vehicle from Hertz, Budget, Avis, or one of the other rental-car companies, all of which have offices here.



Keep safety in mind when you drive here: The roads get very slippery when even slightly wet or when sand blows across them. You drive on the right.

Within walking distance: One of your first welcoming sights is the row of colorful boats docked at **Schooner Harbor**, where locals set up open

Aruba



stalls to display their goods. Up the beach, you can buy fresh seafood right off the boat. **Wilhelmina Park**, with a statue honoring Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, shows the island's Dutch influences and includes a tropical garden.

From the port facility, walk about five minutes up **Lloyd G. Smith Boulevard**, the main road that runs from Queen Beatrix Airport along the waterfront up to Palm Beach. This is where your shopping spree starts, should you have that kind of thing in mind. For quality items such as French perfume, Swiss watches, German and Japanese cameras, English bone china, and other quality goods, cross the street to **Caya**

GF Betico Croes. Delft blue pottery and Edam and Gouda cheeses from Holland are especially good buys.

Two **casinos** are located just steps from the dock: the elegant, 24-hour **Crystal Casino** (at the Aruba Renaissance Beach Resort, L. G. Smith Blvd. 82; ☎ 297-58-36000), and the less assuming **Seaport Casino** (L. G. Smith Blvd. 9; ☎ 297-58-36000). Both get crowded when ships are in port.

Beyond walking distance: If you're renting wheels or taking a taxi tour, you can scope the whole range of Aruba's desert island landscape in a day. You can reach two of the best beaches on the island, **Palm Beach** and **Eagle Beach** (both along the **Turquoise Coast**, west of Oranjestad) via taxi from the cruise terminal for about \$8. All of Aruba's beaches are public, but chairs and shade huts are hotel property. If you use them, expect to be charged.

The **Alhambra Casino & Aladdin Theatre** (J. E. Irausquin Blvd. 47; ☎ 297-58-35000) is the island's busiest casino, with a Moorish theme. It's located at the Manchebo Beach Resort, west of Oranjestad.

About 15 miles southeast of Oranjestad, in the center of the island, the 541-foot **Hooiberg** hill (also known as The Haystack) offers views of Venezuela if the visibility is good. And you only have to climb 600 steps to reach the top. Beyond, further into the island's interior, the building-size **Ayo and Casibari rock formations** served Aruba's early inhabitants as dwellings or religious sites — nobody's sure which, though the reddish-brown petroglyphs on the boulders suggest mystical significance.

Keep going to the northern (Caribbean side) coast to see the **Natural Bridge**, a coral formation more than 100 feet long and 25 feet above sea level. Crashing surf and whipping wind formed the bridge over the centuries, and now it's Aruba's most photographed site. A little to the west, the hulking ruins of the **Bushiribana Gold Smelter** offer another photo-op for folks interested in industrial design. It was built in 1872, and today its multitiered interior offers great sea views.

Head east on the northern coast to see Arikok National Park, which covers a full 20 percent of the island. Its most popular attraction is a series of caves, foremost of which is **Fontein Cave**, with its brownish-red drawings left by Amerindians and graffiti etched by early European settlers. Nearby **Quadirikiri Cave** has two large chambers with roof openings that allow sunlight in, making flashlights unnecessary. Hundreds of small bats use the 100-foot tunnel to reach their nests deeper in the cave. Another area cave, 300-foot Baranca Sunu, is more commonly known as the **Tunnel of Love** because of its heart-shaped entrance. You need a flashlight (for rent for \$6) to explore.

You can see caves decorated with **Arawak artwork** — the oldest traces of human existence on the island — in Savaneta, on the south side of the island about 25 minutes east of Oranjestad by taxi. The area was also a

19th-century industrial center for phosphate mining. Until 1985, an Exxon oil subsidiary refinery operated here. To the east, San Nicolas is home to **Charlie's Bar and Restaurant** (Main Street; ☎ 297-8-45086), which has served two-fisted drinks and decent food since 1941 in a nostalgic setting crammed with pennants, banners, trophies, and other memorabilia.

The Bahamas

Exotic they're not. Nassau and Freeport are some of the busiest cruise ports on the Caribbean circuit, even though technically The Bahamas aren't in the Caribbean at all — they're in the Atlantic, north of the Caribbean and fewer than 100 miles from Miami. Though holdovers from Great Britain's long colonial occupation linger in some architecture and culture, the vibe here isn't all that much different from parts of Florida, and the ports are totally tourist-oriented, with more shopping than at the Mall of America, all surrounded by beaches, casinos, and golf courses.

English is the official language of The Bahamas. Its legal tender is the **Bahamian dollar** (B\$1), whose value is always the same as that of the U.S. dollar. Both currencies are accepted everywhere on the islands.

Cruising into port

In Freeport, ships dock at a dreary port in the middle of nowhere, a \$15 taxi ride from Freeport and the International Bazaar, center of most of the action.

In Nassau, the cruise ship docks are at **Prince George Wharf** in the center of town at Rawson Square, in the middle of Nassau's shopping frenzy.

Scoring the best excursions

In addition to the excursions below, cruise lines typically offer a variety of snorkeling, diving, and boat tours.

Dolphin Encounter: Pat a dolphin on the nose! On this excursion from Freeport, you can watch, touch, and photograph Flipper, or at least one of his relatives. Organized by Unexso Dolphin Encounter (at Sanctuary Bay) (3¼ hours; \$80–\$89).

Kayak Nature Tour: Visit a protected island creek, kayak through a mangrove forest, explore the island's caves, and take a guided nature walk into Lucayan National Park. This Freeport excursion includes lunch and beach time (6 hours; \$70–\$75).

Harbor Cruise and Atlantis Resort: A tour boat with a local guide shows you the sights (such as they are) from the water, then drops you at the fanciful Atlantis Resort in Nassau for a brief tour that includes a visit to Predator Lagoon, home to sharks, barracuda, and other toothy fish (2½ hours; \$42).

Thriller Powerboat Tour: A thrill-seeker's excursion, with high-speed boats roaring around the waters off Nassau, scaring the hell out of the fish. Not our personal favorite way to see . . . well, anything, but it sure is fast (1 hour; \$50).

Exploring on your own in Freeport/Lucaya

Freeport/Lucaya on Grand Bahama Island is visited by far fewer ships than Nassau. Originally intended as two separate developments, Freeport (the landlocked section of town) and Lucaya (which hugs the waterfront) have grown together over the years, offering a mix of sun, surf, golf, tennis, and watersports.

Once you get to Freeport by **taxi**, you can explore the center of town on foot. Taxis can also take you to farther-flung attractions. The government sets taxi rates, which start at \$3 and increase 40¢ for each additional ¼-mile (plus \$3 extra per passenger).

Within walking distance: Nothing of note is within walking distance of the port. You must take a cab for all attractions.

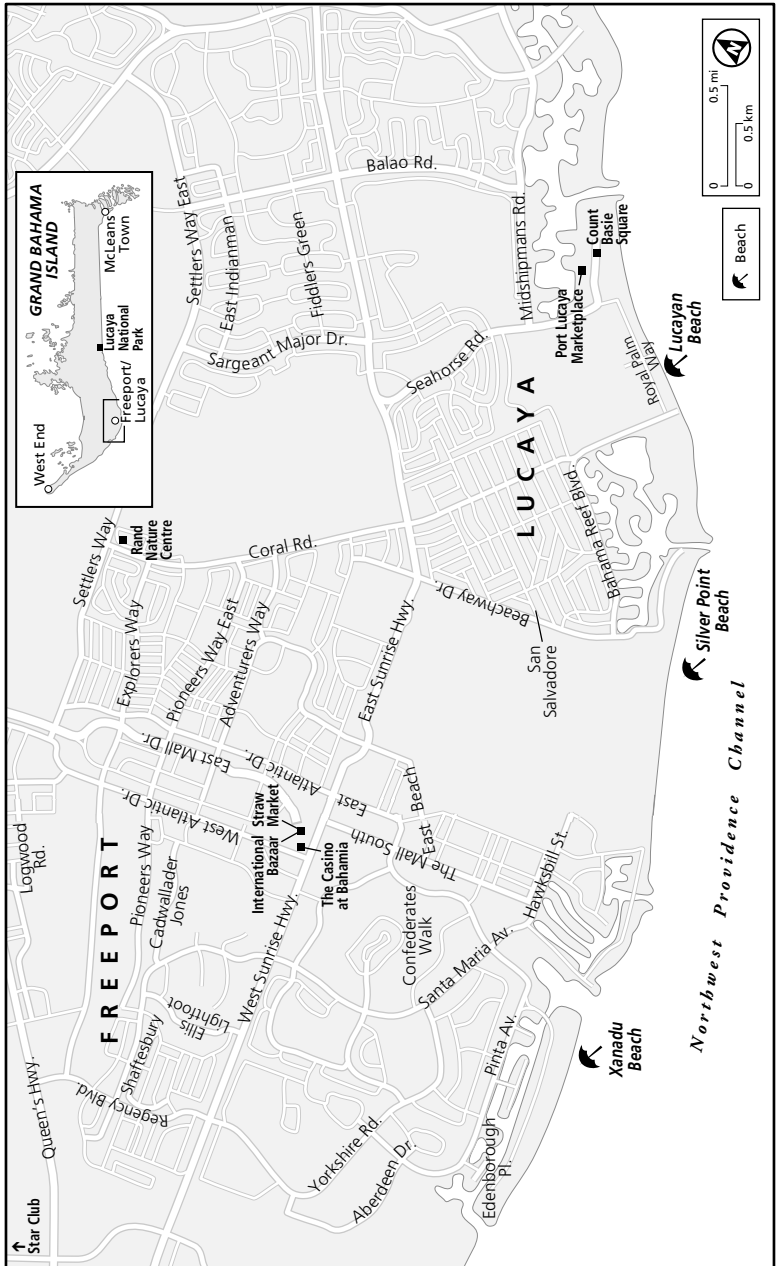
Beyond walking distance: One of the island's prime attractions, the 12-acre **Garden of the Groves** (☎ 242-373-5668 or 242-373-1456; www.gardenofthegroves.com) was once the private meditation garden of Freeport's founder, Wallace Groves. The tranquil park features waterfalls, flowering shrubs, about 10,000 trees, tropical birds, Bahamian raccoons, Vietnamese potbellied pigs, and West African pygmy goats. It's located at the intersection of Midshipman Road and Magellan Drive. Admission is \$10.

A couple of miles east of downtown Freeport on East Settlers Way, the 100-acre **Rand Nature Centre** (☎ 242-352-5438) serves as the regional headquarters of The Bahamas National Trust. Pineland nature trails meander past native flora and wild birds, including the Bahama parrot. Admission is \$5. Closed weekends.

If you'd like a taste of The Bahamas the way they used to be, head for the **Star Club** on the island's west end (Bayshore Road; ☎ 242-346-6207). Built in the 1940s, the Star was Grand Bahama's first hotel, and over the years it's hosted many famous guests. Come for the good times and to mix with the locals, not for the food. Lunch costs \$8. Next door, **Austin's Calypso Bar** is a colorful old dive if ever there was one.

Your best bet at this port is to head for the beach. **Xanadu**, immediately east of Freeport at the Xanadu Beach Resort, is the premier stretch in the Lucaya area, offering most watersports equipment. It can get crowded at times. **Taino Beach**, **Churchill Beach**, and **Fortune Beach** are all conveniently located on the Lucaya oceanfront. A 20-minute ride east of Lucaya, **Gold Rock Beach** may be the island's best. Secluded in Lucayan National Park, it has barbecue pits, picnic tables, and a spectacular low tide. **Barbary Beach**, slightly closer to Lucaya, is great for seashell hunters, and in May and June white spider lilies in the area bloom spectacularly.

Freeport/Lucaya



Then again, maybe shopping is the top draw (just shows you how blah this island is). The **International Bazaar**, at East Mall Drive and East Sunrise Highway, next to the Casino at Bahamia, is pure 1960s Bahamian kitsch, and though relentlessly cheerful, it's a little long in the tooth. Each area of the 10-acre, 100-shop complex attempts to capture the ambience of a different region of the globe. Stereotypes abound. Next door, the **Straw Market** features, you guessed it, straw baskets, hats, handbags, and placemats. The **Port Lucaya Marketplace**, on Seahorse Road, is a large shopping-and-dining complex much like the International Bazaar.

Exploring on your own in Nassau

The Nassau/Paradise Island area comprises two separate islands. Nassau is on the northeastern shore of 21-mile New Providence Island, while tiny Paradise Island is linked to New Providence by bridges, and protects Nassau harbor for a 3-mile stretch.

The major attractions and stores are pretty concentrated near the piers, and if you're really fit you can even trek over to Cable Beach or Paradise Island. (Otherwise, you'll have no problem finding taxis — they'll find you.) There's no good reason to rent a car here.

Within walking distance: As you exit from the cruise ship wharf into the main port area, you have no choice but to pass through **Festival Place**, a barnlike hall full of little shops and stalls. Outside, hawkers encourage you to have your hair braided at the government-sponsored **Hairbraider's Centre**.

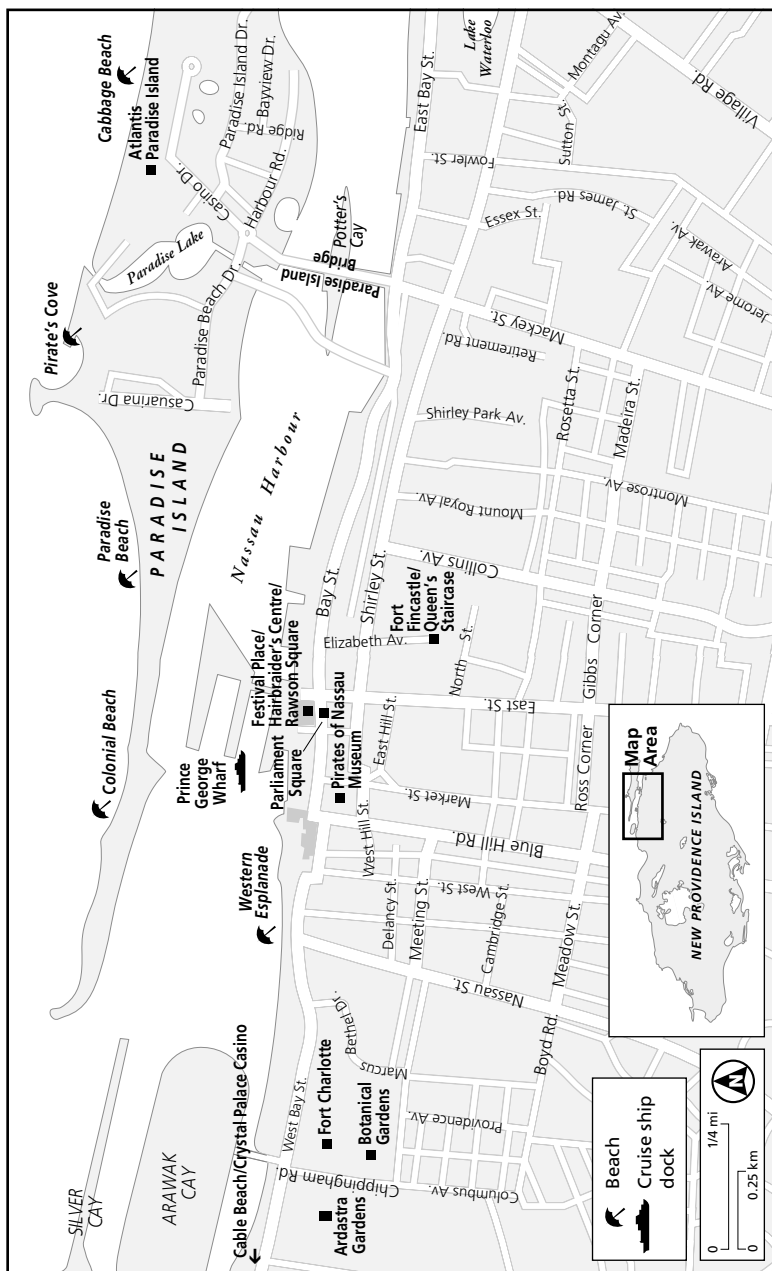
Shopping is *the* thing here, but there are a few other sites of interest. Just across Bay Street from Rawson Square (inland from the wharf) are the flamingo-pink government buildings of **Parliament Square**, constructed in 1815. The House of Assembly, old colonial Secretary's Office, and Supreme Court flank a statue of Queen Victoria, while a bust on the north side of the square honors Sir Milo B. Butler, The Bahamas' first governor-general. One block inland, the pink, octagonal **Nassau Public Library** was built as a prison in 1798, and today it holds a collection of books, historical prints, and more.

Slaves carved the **Queen's Staircase** out of a solid limestone cliff in 1793. Originally designed as an escape route for soldiers, each step now represents a year in Queen Victoria's 65-year reign. Lush plants and a waterfall stand guard over the staircase, which is located a few blocks up from the library on East Street and leads to **Fort Fincastle**, Elizabeth Avenue, built in 1793 by Lord Dunmore, the royal governor. An elevator climbs a 38m (126-ft.) water tower, where you can look down on the fort. Walk around on your own or hire a guide.



If you have kids in tow, the **Pirates of Nassau Museum** (King and George Streets; ☎ 242-356-3759; www.pirates-of-nassau.com) is worthwhile. Admission is a steep \$12 for adults — only worth it if you're with kids, as each adult may bring two children under 12 free; each additional child is \$6.

Nassau





Beyond walking distance: About a mile west of downtown Nassau, just off West Bay Street, **Fort Charlotte** is The Bahamas' largest fort. Built in 1788, it covers more than 100 hilltop acres and offers impressive views of Paradise Island, Nassau, and the harbor. Nearby, parading pink flamingos are the main attraction at the lush, 5-acre **Ardastra Gardens** (Chippingham Road; ☎ **242-323-5806**; www.ardastra.com). The graceful birds obey the drillmaster's orders daily at 10:30 a.m., 2:10 p.m., and 4:10 p.m. daily — kids think the whole thing is a hoot. Admission is \$12, \$6 children 4 to 12.

If you're in the mood for some conch, head for **Arawak Cay**, a small man-made island across West Bay Street from Ardastra Gardens and Fort Charlotte. Join the locals in sampling conch with hot sauce, and wash it down with a cocktail made from coconut water and gin. Farther to the west, the 3,252-sq.-m (35,000-sq.-ft.) **Crystal Palace Casino** (West Bay Street, Cable Beach; ☎ **800-222-7466** or 242-327-6200) is the only casino on New Providence Island.

On Paradise Island, the towering, fancifully designed **Atlantis Paradise Island** megaresort (☎ **242-363-3000**; www.atlantis.com) is the largest gaming and entertainment complex in the Caribbean, all tied together with a "Lost City of Atlantis" theme. Outside, the resort's sprawling 11-million-gallon lagoon system boasts more than 200 sea species and 50,000 individual creatures. **The Dig** is a fantastic world of faux Atlantis ruins flooded by the sea. The interconnected passageways, boulevards, and chambers, now inhabited by piranhas, hammerhead sharks, stingrays, and morays, are visible through huge glass windows.

In general, cruise ship passengers can check out the casino and shops, but are not permitted in certain areas of the resort (namely the beaches, the pools, and the breathtaking water slides). If you sign up for the guided "Discovery Tour," you can explore The Dig. Tickets, available at the resort's guest services desks, are \$29 for adults, \$21 for children 4 to 12 (3 and under free). Disney and Royal Caribbean passengers only are also offered a special day-pass to use Atlantis's beaches.

Other non-Atlantis beaches are on Paradise Island, all just a ferry ride away from Prince George Wharf. **Paradise Beach** is \$3 for adults and \$1 for children, and includes use of a shower and locker. You may also want to check out smaller beaches as well, including **Pirate's Cove Beach** and **Cabbage Beach**, the latter of which often fills up with guests of the nearby resorts.

Five miles from town is **Cable Beach**, which offers various watersports and easy access to shops, a casino, bars, and restaurants. Not on the same level but more convenient for cruise ship passengers, the **Western Esplanade** sweeps westward from the Hilton British Colonial hotel, with changing facilities, restrooms, and a snack bar.

Barbados

In the former British colony of Barbados, cricket is the national pastime, fish and chips appears on local menus, and people drive on the wrong — oops, sorry, we mean the left — side of the road. The island is also one of the most gorgeous in the southern Caribbean, with seemingly endless stretches of pink- and white-sand beaches, small cottages with well-kept gardens, and historic parish churches. The most easterly of the Caribbean islands, its topography varies from rolling hills and savage waves on the Atlantic coast to densely populated flatlands and the sheltered beach/resort areas of the southwest. The northeast part of the island is hilly, with a morning mist that helped it earn the nickname “The Scotland District.”

Predictably, the shopping area near the cruise port in **Bridgetown** can get crowded and noisy. You’re better off making a beeline for the beaches of the **Gold Coast**, the island’s western side, with luxury resorts fronting its calm waters.

English is spoken with an island lilt. The **Barbados dollar** (BD\$) is the official currency (BD\$2.08 = US\$1; BD\$1 = US50¢), but U.S. dollars are commonly accepted.

Cruising into port

The island’s cruise terminal is located about a mile from the capital, Bridgetown, and is a veritable shopping mall, with 25 stores and a fleet of pushcart vendors selling all the usual: jewelry, watches, electronics, china, crystal, perfumes, blah blah blah. Goods made on Barbados, including rum, liquors, and jewelry, are duty-free.

You can walk to town in 15 or 20 minutes via the shoreline park. Otherwise it’s a \$4 taxi ride.

Scoring the best excursions

To get to the best locations in Barbados, you need to catch an excursion or a taxi.

Harrison’s Cave: Barbados’s most popular attraction, all cruise lines offer various tours here. See “Exploring on your own” for details (2 hours; \$49).

Kayak and Turtle Encounter: A boat ride along the west coast brings you to the beach, where you clamber into your kayak for a 45-minute paddle along the shore. Once at the snorkel site, you can swim with and feed sea turtles (3½ hours; \$69).

Rainforest Hike and Cave Adventure: A guide leads your group through one of Barbados’s rain forest gullies, then down into a natural cave (4 hours; \$74).

Jolly Roger Booze Cruise: Board the wooden schooner *Jolly Roger* for a sail along Barbados's west coast, with a pirate crew, beach stop, lots of goofiness (wanna walk the plank?), and lots of booze courtesy of the open bar (3½ hours; \$49).



Atlantis Submarine Adventure: Sail aboard an air-conditioned submersible to view underwater life, including tropical fish, plants, and an intact shipwreck (2½ hours; \$99 adults, \$50 kids).

Exploring on your own

Taxis and car rentals are all available at the cruise terminal. Taxis aren't metered, but their rates are fixed by the government. Settle on the fare before getting in. **Buses** are frequent and inexpensive (the fare is about 75¢), but they can get crowded at rush hour. As an alternative, look for **minibuses** with a "ZR" license plate, which zoom around the island picking up tourists and locals for about the same price as the bus.

Within walking distance: For some, Bridgetown is within walking distance; others may opt to take a taxi. Either way, you won't spend much time here. For some history, stop in at the **Synagogue** (Synagogue Lane, Bridgetown; ☎ 246-432-0840), one of the oldest Jewish houses of worship in the western hemisphere. Brazilian Jews built the first temple on this site in 1654; the current building dates to 1833.



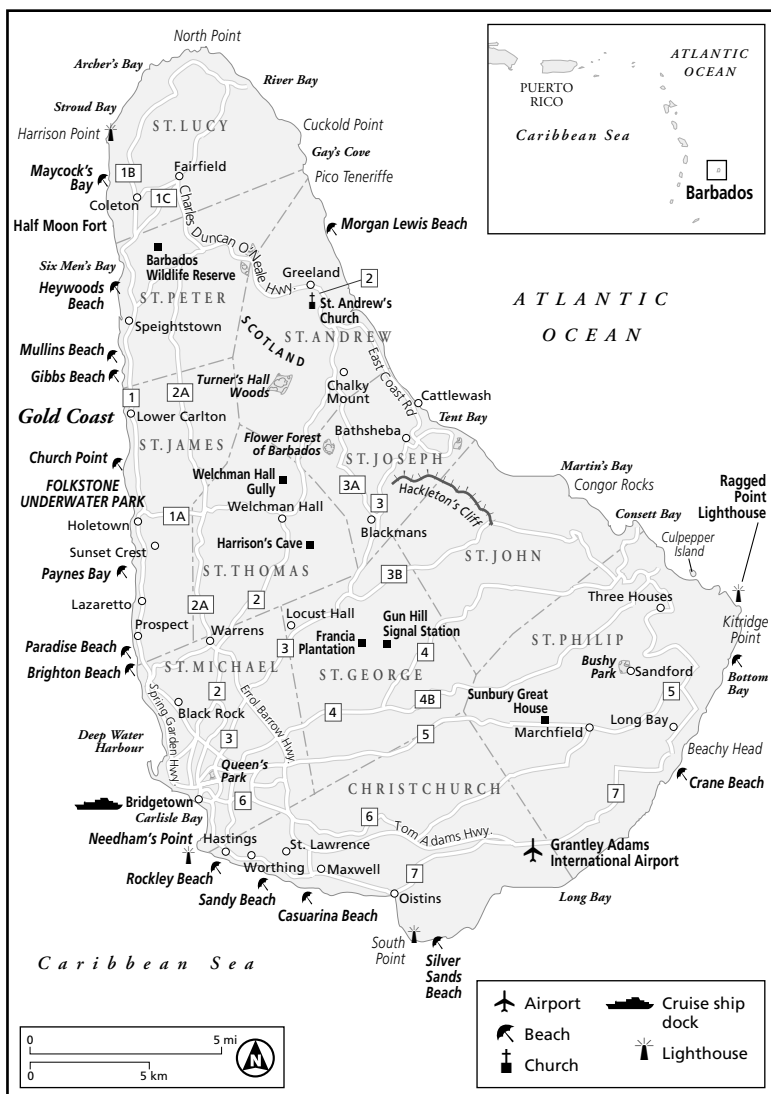
Beyond walking distance: The most popular tourist attraction on the island is **Harrison's Cave** (Welchman Hall, St. Thomas; ☎ 246-438-6640). Electric trams take you down into a series of beautiful coral limestone caverns, full of stalactites, stalagmites, streams, and waterfalls. It's about a \$20 cab ride from the cruise terminal, and admission costs \$13 for adults and \$6 for children. Cruise lines typically offer a couple different tours that stop here.

Only about a mile from the cave, the **Flower Forest** (Richmond Plantation, St. Joseph; ☎ 246-433-8152) is a former sugar plantation that's now a junglelike botanical garden, with paths winding among huge tropical flowers and plants. Admission is \$7.50.

You can take a bus to reach the lush, tropical garden known as **Welchman Hall Gully**, about 8 miles from St. Thomas (☎ 246-438-6671). Some of the plant specimens date back to 1627, when English settlers first arrived. For example, they say the ancient breadfruit trees grew from seedlings brought over by Captain Bligh of *Mutiny on the Bounty* fame. Many of the plants are labeled and occasionally you can spot a wild monkey. Admission is \$10.

The 300-year-old **Sunbury Plantation House** (25 minutes from Bridgetown along Highway 5; ☎ 246-423-6270) is the only plantation house on Barbados whose rooms are all open for viewing, featuring mahogany antiques, old prints, and a collection of horse-drawn carriages. Admission is \$10.

Barbados



All beaches in Barbados are open to the public, though those on the Gold Coast (north of Bridgetown) have calmer waters, and are closer to the port to boot. **Paynes Bay**, about an \$8 cab ride from the port, is excellent for swimming, snorkeling, and other watersports, but can get crowded. Directly south of Paynes Bay, even closer to the port, **Brighton Beach**, **Brandon's Beach**, and **Paradise Beach** are all fine alternatives,

clustered around Fresh Water Bay. Farther north, **Church Point** can get crowded, but it's one of the most scenic bays in Barbados, and the swimming is ideal.

The British Virgin Islands

Once upon a time, the British Virgin Islands served as a haven for pirates, but today they're a haven for sun-seekers. Most of the 40-some islands that make up the island group are quite small. Cruise ships stop at the largest three: **Tortola**, **Virgin Gorda** (or "Fat Virgin," so named by Christopher Columbus, which has got to make you wonder), and the less-frequented and very rustic **Jost Van Dyke**.

Treasure Island fans get a kick out of **Norman Island**, said to be the setting for Robert Louis Stevenson's classic tale. Legend holds that the notorious pirate Blackbeard stashed a bottle of rum and marooned 15 men at Deadman Bay on neighboring **Peter Island**, inspiring the famous "yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum" ditty.

Although their official name is the *British Virgin Islands*, the **U.S. dollar** is the official currency. Go figure. **English** is the official language.

Cruising into port

Most large ships sail into **Tortola**, docking at Wickhams Cay, a pleasant five-minute walk to Main Street in Road Town. If more than two ships are in port, the latecomers have to anchor offshore and bring passengers in by tender. **Virgin Gorda** doesn't have a pier or landing facilities for large ships. Most that stop at Tortola offer excursions to Virgin Gorda instead. Smaller vessels may anchor offshore and tender passengers in to St. Thomas Bay, the port area and yacht harbor for Spanish Town. Ferries from Tortola also berth here. Some small ships visit hilly, 4-square-mile **Jost Van Dyke**, tendering passengers in for a beach day.

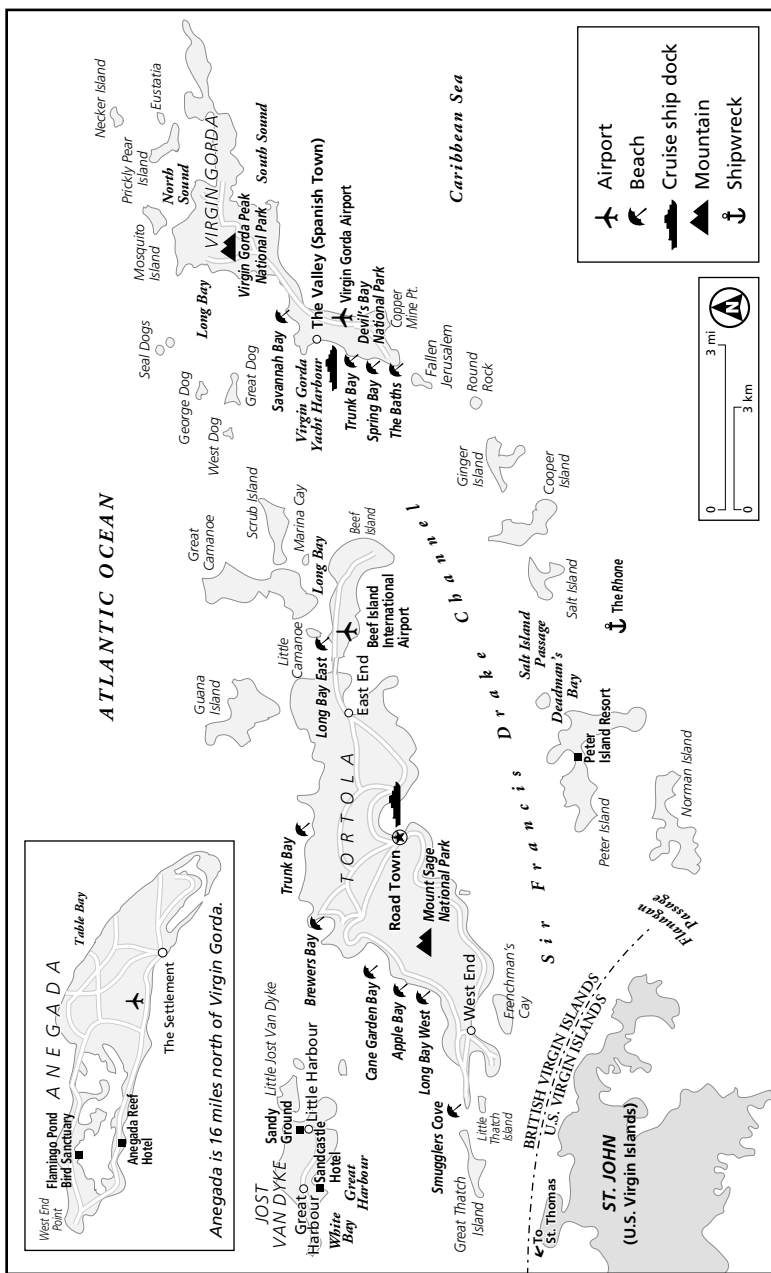
Scoring the best excursions

Tortola is the only one of the Virgin Islands where it makes sense to take an excursion — and some of those excursions go to the *other* Virgin Islands.

Virgin Gorda and the Baths: Travel by boat from Tortola across the Sir Francis Drake Channel to Spanish Town, on Virgin Gorda, then board open-air buses to the Baths for sunning, swimming, and snorkeling amid mammoth boulders and sea caves (for more details, see "Exploring on your own in Virgin Gorda," later in this chapter). Includes a Caribbean-style buffet lunch (4 hours; \$62).

Town and Country Excursion: Tour Tortola in an open-air minibus, visiting the Botanical Gardens, Cane Garden Bay, Bomba's Full Moon Party Shack, and Soper's Hole (for more description, see the next section, "Exploring on your own in Tortola") (3½ hours; \$34).

The British Virgin Islands



Tortola Snorkeling Adventure: Cross the Sir Frances Drake Channel by boat to Norman Island, one of the BVI's prime snorkel sites, full of coral formations, colorful fish, and a group of caves at Treasure Point, where pirate loot is said to have been hidden (2½ hours; \$48).

Forest Walk and Beach Tour: Safari buses take you to Tortola's interior for a mile-long hike through the Sage Mountain rain forest to the highest point in the Virgin Islands, followed by a brief stop at the Botanical Gardens (3½ hours; \$35).

Exploring on your own in Tortola

Tortola is the largest and busiest of the British Virgin Islands. Its capital, **Road Town**, is a popular yachting center as well as the port for cruise ships. The rest of the southern coast is characterized by rugged mountain peaks, while the north coast has beautiful white-sand beaches fringed with palm trees, bananas, and mangoes.

Whether your ship docks or tenders passengers in, you end up right in town, about a five-minute walk to Main Street. Open-air and sedan-style **taxis** meet every arriving ship to carry passengers to the beaches and other attractions. Fares are set, so ask what you'll pay before you get in. If you want to **rent a car**, Budget, Hertz, and Avis all have offices here.

Within walking distance: You can walk from the pier to Tortola's **Main Street**, which has a relatively quiet shopping area by Caribbean standards, although you can get some good bargains on duty-free British goods such as English china. Across from the dock on the waterfront is **Pusser's Road Town Pub** (☎ 284-494-3897), with an extensive menu and the infamous Pusser's Rum, which was served aboard British Navy ships for over 300 years. The attached company store offers a selection of clothing and other logo items, some pretty cool.

Beyond walking distance: Drive or take a taxi to 92-acre **Mount Sage National Park**, where the namesake mountain soars to a magnificent 1,780 feet amid a lush tropical rain forest setting, which you can explore via nature trails. (You can pick up a trail map at the tourist office in the center of Road Town near the dock just south of **Wickhams Cay**.) The park was established in 1964 to protect what was left of Tortola's original forests, following the depredations of the plantation era.

Most of Tortola's beaches are a 20-minute taxi ride from the cruise dock, costing about \$15 per person each way. Discuss price with the driver before setting out, and ask him to pick you up later, in time to get back to the ship. The best beach is at **Cane Garden Bay** on the island's north-west side, across the mountains from Road Town but worth the trip. Surfers like **Apple Bay**, also on the northwest side, while next-door Cappoon's Bay is known more for **Bomba's Surfside Shack** (☎ 284-495-4148), a legendary island bar built from what looks like scrap lumber and covered in day-glo graffiti. Painkillers — one of the Caribbean's legendary rum drinks — are a specialty. If you want to snorkel, the best

beaches on Tortola are **Smugglers Cove**, on the western tip, and **Brewer's Bay**, on the northwest side.

Exploring on your own in Virgin Gorda

Instead of heading for Tortola, some smaller ships anchor outside of Virgin Gorda and bring visitors ashore by tender. You have to take a taxi to get there, but **The Baths** is the most popular beach destination on the island, looking like something Frank Gehry would have designed had he lived during the Neolithic age. It's a group of house-sized boulders, which geologists believe toppled onto one another as a result of ice-age eruptions, forming the dramatic shapes and saltwater grottoes we see today. It's an enormously fun area to swim around and explore, crawling under and between huuuuge boulders that you just know are going to fall over and crush you, but of course don't. A cafe sits just above the beach.

Spring Bay, just north of The Baths, is a great white-sand beach with clear water and good snorkeling. Farther north still, **Trunk Bay** is a wide sand beach reachable via a rough path from Spring Bay. **Devil's Bay**, just south of The Baths, is a less crowded swimming option.

Exploring on your own in Jost Van Dyke

Jost Van Dyke is visited mostly by private yachts and a few small cruise ships such as those of Windjammer Barefoot Cruises, which often throws afternoon beach parties on the beach at White Bay. If your ship stays late, head to **Foxy's** (☎ 284-495-9258), a legendary beach bar at the far end of Great Harbour. It's a scene.

Cozumel and Playa del Carmen, Mexico

Woooo-ey, is **Cozumel** ever a busy place. Located just off Mexico's Yucatán coast, it gets up to 16 ships visiting *every single day* during high season. Do the math; that's something like 25,000 cruise passengers tromping down the gangways. Zowie. The island's main town, San Miguel (located on the island's western shore, where the best resorts and beaches are also found), is tourist central, with hundreds of stores, bars, and restaurants strung out along its waterfront and side streets. Get beyond the tourist zone, though, and things calm way down.

Playa del Carmen, on the mainland, is much quieter, with a small but expanding shopping district, some trendy boutiques and hip restaurants, and beaches. Mostly it's a jumping-off point for excursions and treks to the mainland's main draws: the Mayan ruins of **Tulum**, **Chichén Itzá**, and **Cobá**, plus a couple of water parks. Some ships spend one day in Cozumel and the next in Playa, though more frequently they just run boats from Cozumel to the mainland, 45 minutes away. There's also a regular ferry service, if you want to go on your own.

In recent years, a handful of other Yucatán ports have come onto the scene, including **Calica**, just south of Playa; **Costa Maya**, about 161km (100 miles) south near the sleepy fishing village of Mahajual; and

Progreso, on the Gulf coast of the Yucatán, making it the closest to both Chichén Itzá and the city of Merida. Costa Maya is the most elaborate of the three, with shopping, entertainment, beaches and beach bars, and activities. The others are little more than piers giving easier access to the other Yucatán attractions.

Spanish is the language of Mexico, although English is spoken by nearly everyone you deal with in the tourist zone. The Mexican currency is the **nuevo peso** (new peso). Its symbol is the “\$” sign, but the exchange rate is about \$11 pesos to US\$1 (\$1 peso = about US9¢). The main tourist stores accept U.S. dollars.

Cruising into port

Cruise ship berths are scattered all along the coast of San Miguel. The newest is **Punta Langosta**, in the center of town, just steps from the action and about a quarter mile from the ferries to Playa del Carmen. Other berths are at the **International Pier** (2 miles south of San Miguel) or the **Puerto Maya pier** (a little farther still). Both are about a \$6 taxi ride from town. Beaches are closest to the International Pier.

Scoring the best excursions

The Mayan ruins on the mainland are, in our opinion, an absolute must. Because all ruins involve some traveling (especially from Cozumel), we recommend visiting as part of an excursion. In addition to the ruins, cruise lines always offer snorkeling, horseback riding, booze-cruising, folkloric shows, dolphin swims, submarine and scuba dives, ATV off-roading, bicycle treks, parasailing, kayaking, fishing, and more.

Tulum Mayan Ruins/Xel-Ha: About a 30-minute drive from Playa del Carmen, the small walled city of Tulum is usually the only ruin of consequence you can visit if you're coming from Cozumel. It was the only Mayan city built right on the coast (it's backed by sea cliffs) and the only one still inhabited when the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the 1500s. In the company of a trained guide, you visit some of the 60 individual structures, including a temple to Kukulkán, the primary Mayan/Olmec god. The Tulum tour is sold either on its own (6½ hours; \$75) or in combination with a visit to the **Xel-Ha Eco Park** (8 hours; \$99), a natural lagoon where you can drift from one end to the other in an inner tube, accompanied by schools of tropical fish. Snorkeling gear is available, as is a swim-with-dolphins option (for an extra cost).

Chichén Itzá: The most fabled of the Yucatán ruins, Chichén Itzá was founded in A.D. 445 and at its height was home to about 50,000 residents. All told, it's absolutely huge, covering an area of 7 square miles, though tours visit only a fraction of that, which is enough. The best known of Chichén Itzá's ruins is the magnificent El Castillo pyramid (also called the Pyramid of Kukulkán), with four 91-step outside stairways leading up to a central platform. Do the math and the steps add up to the number of days in the solar year ($91 \times 4 = 364$, plus one for the central platform).

Cozumel/Playa del Carmen Area



On the spring and fall equinoxes, light striking the pyramid gives the illusion of a snake slithering down the steps to join its gigantic stone head mounted at the base. Those Mayans knew what they were doing. Typical tours also visit a sports court where the captain of the losing (or winning — nobody knows) team was sacrificed to the gods. Other stops include a well where virgins were sacrificed, and a temple where (guess!) other folks were sacrificed. They were big on sacrifices, those Mayans. Kidding aside, it's an absolutely incredible place, and one of the best excursions we've ever taken. Due to its distance into the Yucatán interior, this tour is typically offered only by ships calling at one of the mainland ports (12 hours; \$149).

Cobá: A 35-minute drive inland from Tulum puts you at Cobá, once the commercial hub of the Mayan civilization, flourishing from A.D. 300 to 1000. Today, more than 3,500 structures have been identified on its grounds, which are bounded by four natural lakes. Excavation work began in 1972, but only a fraction of the city has been reclaimed from the jungle. Cobá's pyramid, Nohoch Mul, is the tallest in the Yucatán. Excursions travel here from both Cozumel and Playa (8 hours; \$89).

Xcaret: From Cozumel, you transfer by ferry to Playa del Carmen then by bus to this unique eco-archaeological theme park, whose name is pronounced ish-car-et. You have about 3½ hours on site to enjoy the park's blue lagoons, lazy rivers, botanical gardens, aviary, aquarium, and cultural performances. The highlight of this visit is the underground river tour, which involves donning a float-vest and letting a gentle current carry you along a crystal river through an underground cave. This tour is offered from both Cozumel and Playa (8 hours; \$88).

Exploring on your own in Cozumel

Depending on where you dock, you can either walk right into the tourist throng or take a short **taxi** ride to it — or away from it, depending on your preference. The typical fare from the farthest piers to downtown San Miguel is about \$6. From San Miguel to most resorts and beaches is usually between \$10 and \$15. Be sure to settle on the fare before you start out. Many passengers also rent **mopeds** from one of many, many vendors. The cost is usually about \$30 to \$35 per day, including helmet.

To get far away, you can take the ferry from Cozumel and Playa del Carmen for \$9 per person. The crossing takes approximately 45 minutes.

Within walking distance: The things to do in central San Miguel are shopping and drinking, both of which can easily be done on foot — either solidly or canted sideways, depending on how much you imbibe. **Avenida Rafael Melgar** runs along the waterfront and is chockablock with shops, bars, and restaurants. Ditto for the streets around the **Plaza del Sol**, which lies just behind Avenida Melgar, at the foot of the ferry pier. Shops sell the usual tourist goods, Mexican crafts, and especially **silver jewelry**, which is generally sold by weight. Prices are relatively high, but you can and should bargain. If you dock at the International

Pier, a bunch of nice shops in the terminal sell everything from Mexican blankets to jewelry, T-shirts, and handicrafts of all kinds. The pier at Puerta Maya also has a number of well-stocked gift shops.

The most iconic of the downtown bars — for better or worse — is **Carlos 'n Charlie's** (Av. Rafael Melgar 551; ☎ 987-869-1446; www.carlosn-charlies.com). It's like a Mexican Hard Rock Cafe, with about as much authenticity.

If that's not your scene, you can drop into the small **Museo de la Isla de Cozumel** (on Rafael Melgar between Calles 4 and 6 N; ☎ 987-872-1475). The building, which began life as Cozumel's first luxury hotel, houses two floors of historical exhibits, from pre-Hispanic times to the present. Admission is \$3.



Beyond walking distance: The **Chankanaab Nature Park** (www.cozumelparks.com.mx) is a wildlife sanctuary, archaeological park, cultural park, and water park all in one. Just 10 minutes from the downtown pier by taxi (about \$10–\$12), you can swim in a saltwater lagoon with a beautiful powder-white beach, snorkel or scuba among fish-filled offshore reefs (equipment rentals are available), stroll through the botanical garden (home to more than 800 plant species), walk around a replica Mayan village, go to the interactive archaeological museum, take in a sea lion show, or see dolphins perform at the Dolphinarium. To swim with the dolphins, make reservations in advance at **Dolphin Discovery** in Cancún (☎ 998-849-4757; www.dolphindiscovery.com/cozumel). Park admission is \$12 adults, \$6 kids 3 to 11. Dolphin swims are \$119.

Mayan ruins on Cozumel are very minor compared to those on the mainland, but if you're driving around you can visit **San Gervasio** (north of San Miguel), once a ceremonial center and capital, and **El Cedral** (to the south), site of a Mayan arch and a few small ruins covered in heavy growth. Cozumel's best beach, **Playa San Francisco**, is only 2 miles from El Cedral. Another mile or so south is **Playa del Sol**, one of the island's more popular and crowded beaches.

Exploring on your own in Playa del Carmen

Within walking distance: Playa del Carmen is much more low-key than Cozumel. From the ferry dock you can walk to the white-sand beach or explore the ever-expanding shopping district, which has numerous shops, bars, and restaurants. For shopping, stroll the **Rincon del Sol**, a tree-lined Mexican colonial-style courtyard with some appealing local handicrafts stores.

Beyond walking distance: For all attractions beyond town, see “Scoring the best excursions,” earlier in this section.

Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles

Curaçao (pronounced coo-ra-sow) is the largest and most populous of the Netherlands Antilles — the so-called ABC islands (Aruba, Bonaire,

Curaçao) located about 35 miles north of the Venezuelan coast. A Dutch possession since the 17th century, it has served over the years as a trading post, oil-refining center, and tourist destination. Today, it retains its Dutch flavor, especially in the capital of **Willemstad**. When your ship arrives at Willemstad's harbor, you can watch the town's famous floating bridge swing aside and invite you into a narrow channel, where rows of centuries-old pastel-colored homes create a fairy-tale effect. According to local lore, the houses were originally painted white, but were so blindingly bright in the hot Caribbean sun that the first Dutch colonial governors ordered them painted in softer, vibrant colors. Contrasting with this quaint and colorful architecture, the rest of the desertlike island may remind you of the southwestern United States.

Dutch, Spanish, and English are all spoken on Curaçao. The official currency is the **Netherlands Antillean florin** (NAf), also called a guilder (US\$1 = 1.77 NAf; 1 NAf = US56¢). Most places accept U.S. dollars for purchases.

Cruising into port

Cruise ships dock in Willemstad at a megapier just beyond the Queen Emma pontoon bridge. It has a tourist information booth, car rental agencies, duty-free shopping, and workshop space for local artists. Just beyond the bridge is the famous **Floating Market** (see below). The adjacent fort houses **Riffort Village**, a shopping/entertainment complex.

Scoring the best excursions

Animal Encounter Scuba Adventure: Suit up in scuba gear and explore a shallow natural tidal pool at the edge of a colorful reef. There's a fence between you and those sharks and sea turtles, but you can feed them through holes. Meanwhile, on your side of the fence, you can interact with stingrays, parrotfish, and other marine life. Because the water is so shallow, scuba certification isn't required (4 hours; \$89)

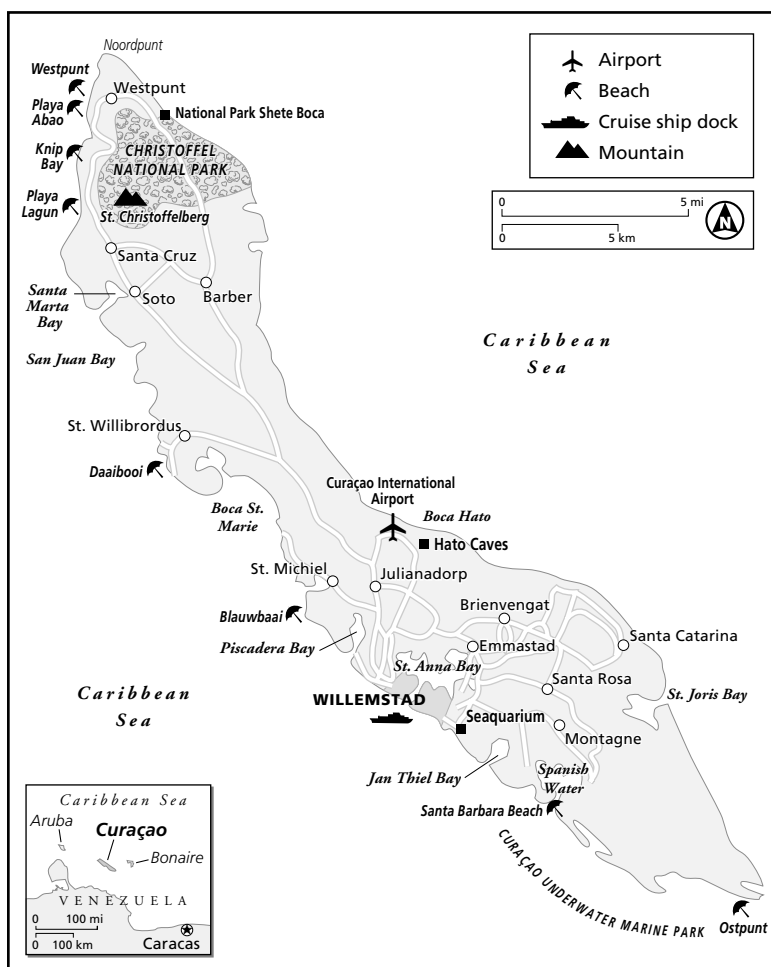
Spanish Water Canoe and Snorkeling: Board canoes at Caracas Bay Island for a 45-minute paddle alongside mangroves and rock formations. At Baya Beach, instructors lead snorkeling excursions over a sunken tugboat (3½ hours; \$69).

Exploring on your own

From the pier, it's just a five- to ten-minute walk across the **Queen Emma pontoon bridge** to the city's principal shopping and business areas. You can "do" Willemstad on foot in two or three hours, which leaves you plenty of time for beaches or watersports. **Taxi** drivers waiting at the cruise dock can take you to any of the beaches. Fares are fixed, so ask the driver what the rate to your destination is before you set out. If you want him to pick you up again later, just inquire. If you want a taxi tour, you can share with up to four passengers total for about \$30 per hour.

You can also get around the island by two kinds of buses. Take either a van (easily recognizable by the word **BUS** on the license plate) or one of the yellow or blue buses called *konvoi*. Yellow buses run from **Wilhelmina**

Curaçao



Plein (near the shopping center) to most parts of the island. Fares to any point are under \$2.

Within walking distance: Boats from Venezuela, Colombia, and other Caribbean islands dock at the **Floating Market**, a short walk from the Queen Emma pontoon bridge. Here, amid a bustling crowd, vendors sell fresh fish, tropical fruits, spices, and crafts. Nearby, you can trace the island's history through the exhibits at the **Curaçao Maritime Museum** (Van den Brandhof Street; ☎ 5999-465-2327; www.curacaomaritime.com). Admission is about \$6. A guided harbor tour by boat is \$12, including museum admission.

The oldest Jewish congregation in the New World gathers in the 1651 **Mikve Israel Emanuel Synagogue** (at the corner of Columbusstraat and Hanchi Snog). White sand covers the floor, symbolic of the desert that the early Israelites roamed. Next door, the **Jewish Cultural Historical Museum** (Hanchi Snoa 29; ☎ 599-9-461-1633; www.snoa.com) is housed in two buildings dating from 1728. They were the rabbi's residence and the *mikvah* (bath) for religious purification purposes. Entry is through the synagogue and admission is about \$2.

The **Curaçao Museum** (Van Leeuwenhoekstraat; ☎ 599-9-462-3873) is housed in a restored 1853 building constructed by the Royal Dutch Army as a military hospital. Today, it displays paintings, objets d'art, and antique furniture, as well as a large collection from the Caiquetio tribes. Admission is about \$3.

Housed in a former slave yard and prison, **Museum Kura Hulanda** (Klipstraat 9; ☎ 5999-434-7765; www.kurahulanda.com) is an anthropological museum that focuses on the predominant cultures of Curaçao, chronicling the African slave trade, West African empires, pre-Colombian gold, Mesopotamian relics, and Antillean art. You reach the museum via small boats that cross the harbor. Admission is about \$5.50.



Beyond walking distance: Home to more than 400 species of fish and plant life, the **Curaçao Seaquarium** (off Bhopor Kibra, just east of Willemstad; ☎ 599-9-465-8900; www.curaçao-sea-aquarium.com) offers divers, snorkelers, and experienced swimmers a chance to feed, film, and photograph sharks, stingrays, lobsters, and other marine life in a controlled environment. If you don't swim, a 46-foot semi-submersible observatory enables you to watch the underwater action. If you don't do semi-submersibles, the Seaquarium also maintains the island's only full-facility, palm-shaded, sugar-white beach. The facility is about a ten-minute, \$8 cab ride from Queen Emma pontoon bridge. Admission is \$15 for adults and \$7.50 for children under 14.

A 40-minute taxi ride west of Willemstad, you can see cacti, bromeliads, rare orchids, iguanas, donkeys, wild goats, and many species of birds in 4,500-acre **Christoffel National Park** (near the northwestern tip of Curaçao; ☎ 599-9-864-0363). The park rises from flat, arid countryside to 1,230-foot **St. Christoffelberg**, the tallest point in the Dutch Leewards. Hiking along several trails to the top of the mountain, you find Arawak paintings and the **Piedra di Monton**, a rock heap piled by African slaves who cleared this former plantation. Legend says slaves could climb to the top of the rock pile, jump off, and fly back home across the Atlantic to Africa. The park has 20 miles of one-way trail-like roads for driving tours and several hiking trails that go to the top of the mountain. It takes about 1½ hours to walk to the top. Admission is \$9.

Next to Christoffel National Park, **National Park Shete Boka** (Seven Inlets in the Papiamentu language) encompasses rugged seaside cliffs carved in dramatic patterns. The highlight is Boka Tabla, a wide cavern carved by millions of years of pounding surf. The place is also a turtle sanctuary. Admission is about \$1.50.

If you want to explore the island's deeper side, head to **Hato Caves** (F. D. Rooseveltweg; ☎ **599-9-868-0379**). Originally a coral reef, the limestone formations were created over thousands of years by water seeping through the coral and pushing it upward. After crossing the lake, you enter two caverns known as "The Cathedral" and La Ventana ("The Window"), where you see samples of ancient Indian petroglyphs. Local guides take visitors through every hour. Admission is \$6.25 for adults, \$4.75 for kids under 13.

Honeymooners and other couples can snuggle on a blanket at one of Curaçao's 38 beautiful beaches. The better ones are **Santa Barbara Beach**, south of Willemstad; **Blauwbaai** (Blue Bay), just west of the city; and **Playa Abao, Knip Bay**, and other stretches way up near the island's western tip.

Dominica

Tiny Dominica (pronounced dome-ee-nee-ka), sandwiched between Guadeloupe and Martinique, is the most lush and mountainous island in the eastern Caribbean. About 29 miles long and 16 wide, it's blessed with astonishing natural wonders, including lush rain forests, crystal-pure rivers, and dramatic waterfalls. Volcanic coral reefs, every bit as biologically complex as the rain forests onshore, ring the island, and a bit farther from land, whales mate and calve. No wonder they call this "the nature island of the Caribbean." On the downside, the island's capital, Roseau, is a little rough around the edges, and the island's shore lacks the kind of sugar-white beaches many folks associate with the Caribbean. That isn't the point of Dominica, though. Here, it's all about nature, with a little bit of the most authentic Caribbean culture mixed in: up in the island's northeast live about 3,000 Carib Indians, the last remaining descendants of the people who dominated the region when Europeans arrived, and gave it its name.

The **Eastern Caribbean dollar** (EC\$2.72 = US\$1; EC\$1 = US37¢) is the official currency, but merchants accept the U.S. dollar virtually everywhere. The official language is **English**, but most people also speak Creole.

Cruising into port

Dominica has two cruise ship ports. The most frequented is in the heart of **Roseau**, the country's capital and largest town, with banks, restaurants, a market, a tourism office, and the Dominica Museum all within spitting distance. The other is near the northwestern town of **Portsmouth**, closer to attractions such as Cabrits National Park and Fort Shirley (see "Exploring on your own," later in this chapter).

Scoring the best excursions

Trafalgar Falls and Emerald Pool Nature Tour: Drive to Morne Bruce for a panoramic view of Roseau and visit the Botanical Gardens. Proceed to a lookout point for a fantastic view of Trafalgar Falls before driving into the interior, where you walk 15 minutes along a relatively easy trail

to the **Emerald Pool**, named for the moss-covered boulders that enclose it. You can swim if you like, floating on your back under the rain forest canopy and 50-foot waterfall (3½ hours; \$45).

Home of the Carib Indians: Located on Dominica's northeastern coast, the 3,700-acre Carib Territory is home to the world's last surviving population of Carib Indians. The Caribs today live like most other rural islanders — growing bananas and coconuts, fishing, and operating small shops — but they maintain cultural and artistic traditions that bind them to their past. On your visit, the tribe's chief will acquaint you with Carib history, and you'll see a performance by the Karifuna Cultural Group (5 hours; \$54).

Dominica by Jeep and Swimming at the Titou Gorge: A jeep convoy heads up Morne Bruce for a picturesque view, stopping at the Botanical Gardens and the Wotten Waven Sulphur Springs before arriving at the volcanic Titou Gorge for a swim among sheer 20-foot black walls, rock outcrops, caves, and a thundering waterfall (3½ hours; \$99).

Layou Gorge River Tubing: Tubing guides take you downriver through the Layou Valley, lined with tall, overhanging cliffs and lush vegetation (3 hours; \$64).

Kayak and Snorkel Safari: A guided kayaking trip takes you from Soufrière to your snorkeling site at Scotts Head. The bay here is home to an amazing amount of marine life and coral, and it's common to see dolphins and frigate birds feeding (3½ hours; \$59).

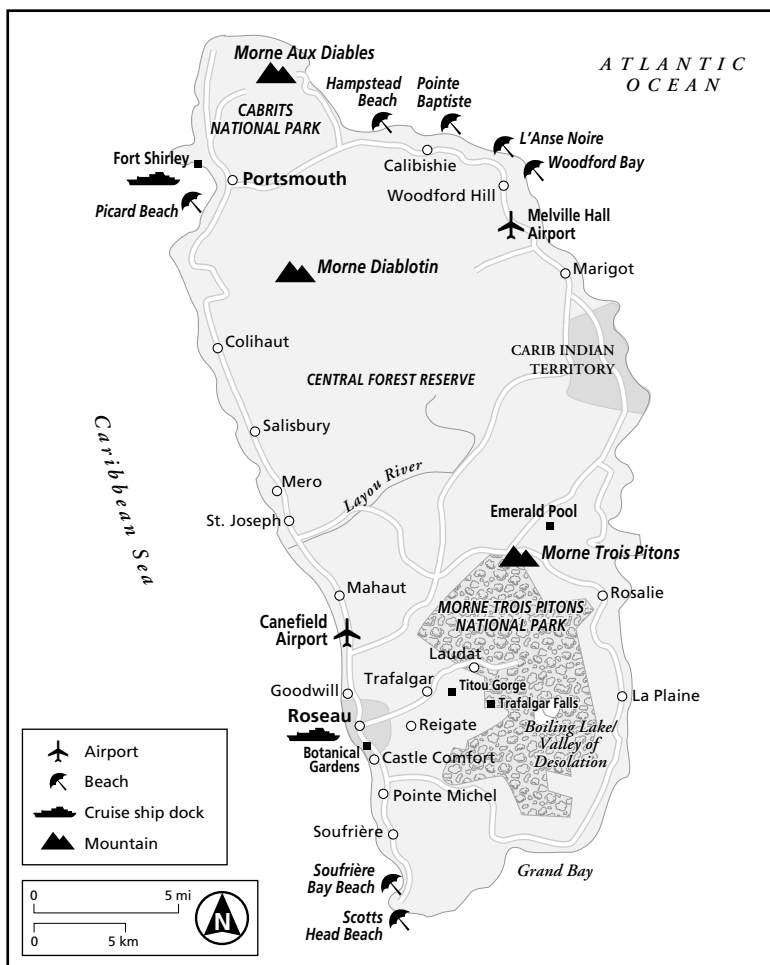
Exploring on your own

Fleets of **taxis** and **public minivans** await cruise ship passengers at the dock. All are designated by a "HA" or "H" on the license plate. Drivers are generally knowledgeable about sites and history, and the standard sightseeing rate is from \$20 per site per person. The vehicles are unmetered, so negotiate a price in advance.

Within walking distance: On the bay front at the dock in Roseau is the **Dominica Museum**, located in an old market house dating from 1810. Its permanent exhibit illustrates the island's geology, history, archeology, economy, and culture. Admission is \$3. Behind the museum is **Old Market Square**, where merchants have gathered for centuries. At one time, it was also the site for executions, slave auctions, and political rallies. Now, you find Dominican crafts and souvenirs for sale. The **Public Market Place**, at the mouth of the Roseau River and to your left as you leave the ship, is the town's commercial hub. Expect it to be especially jumping on Saturday mornings when farmers and countryside vendors display fruits, vegetables, and flowers.

On the eastern edge of Roseau, also within walking distance of the docks, the **Botanical Gardens** lie at the base of Morne Bruce, the mountain overlooking the town. The gardens were established at the end of the 19th century, and about 150 of the 500 original species of trees and

Dominica



shrubs remain. Keep your eyes out for the Carib Wood tree, whose red blossom is the island's national flower (in bloom Mar–May).

The cruise ship dock at Portsmouth leads directly to the 260-acre **Cabrits National Park** (it takes 45–60 minutes to drive here from the Roseau dock, and a cab is \$60). The park boasts dazzling mountain scenery, tropical forests, swamplands, volcanic sand beaches, coral reefs, and the ruins of **Fort Shirley**, an 18th-century garrison. Some of the park has been partly reconstructed, and look for stone walls and cannons hidden among vegetation along the trails. Previous visitors to the area have included Christopher Columbus, Sir Francis Drake,

Admiral Horatio Nelson, and John Smith, who stopped here on his way to Virginia to found Jamestown. You can spend a whole day touring the park, so wear good walking shoes. Admission is \$2.

Beyond walking distance: About 15 to 20 minutes by cab from Roseau is **Trafalgar Falls**, two separate cascades that tumble side by side. A short trail from the road brings you to a viewing platform where you see the two falls converge into rocky pools. You can take a dip in the brisk water at the base of the falls, but be careful, the rocks are slippery.

Emerald Pool is located deep in the rain forest, not far from the center of the island. Expect about a 40-minute drive from Roseau. After you walk 15 minutes along a flat trail shaded by magnificent trees, you reach a 50-foot waterfall that crashes into the pool, which is named for the moss-covered boulders that enclose it. It's like a natural cathedral — except you can't swim around in most cathedrals.

Another swimming spot that beckons visitors is **Titou Gorge**, near the village of Laudat, northeast of Roseau. The water-filled canyon snakes along to the base of a waterfall. The flow is quite strong, and at times, you may feel like a salmon swimming upstream. A hot mineral cascade at the canyon's mouth relieves sore muscles. From Roseau to Laudat is about a 30-minute drive.

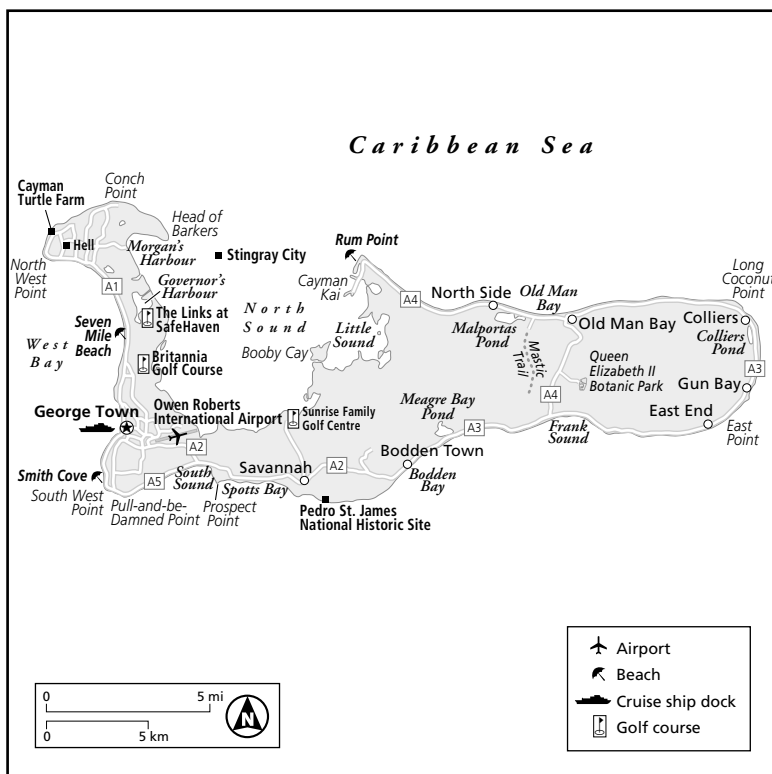
Beaches — featuring plenty of rocks and dark, volcanic sand — are not Dominica's strong point, but the island's top choices are **Hampstead Beach, Hodges Beach, L'Ance Noire**, and **Woodford Bay**, all on the northern coast, about 20 minutes from Roseau.

Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands

Mostly scrubland and swamp, Grand Cayman and its sister islands (Cayman Brac and Little Cayman) are anything but lush. Still, the island boasts its share of upscale, expensive private homes and condos, owned by millionaire expatriates from all over who come because of the tiny nation's lenient tax and banking laws. For tourists, Grand Cayman is known most for what's offshore — spectacular coral reefs that make for some really great **diving and snorkeling**. The island also has a nice stretch of sand, **Seven Mile Beach**, that fronts a strip of high-rise hotels. If all you care about is shopping, you're in luck. George Town, the British colony's capital and place where you'll land when your ship calls here, has its fair share of brand-name stores.

In 2004, Hurricane Ivan tore through Grand Cayman, causing substantial flooding, destroying many homes and businesses, and severely damaging power and sewage networks. Things were such a mess that the island was officially closed to tourists for two months. However, with tourism accounting for some 45 percent of the Caymans' GDP, cleanup was swift. Ships began returning in late November, and at press time things were more or less back to normal.

Grand Cayman



English is the official language of the islands. The legal tender is the **Cayman Islands dollar** (CI82¢ = US\$1; CI\$1 = US\$1.22), but U.S. dollars are commonly accepted. Be sure to note which currency price tags refer to before making a purchase.

Cruising into port

Cruise ships anchor off George Town and ferry their passengers to a pier on Harbour Drive, right in the midst of George Town's thriving shopping district.



If seas are choppy, which happens fairly often, the piers may be closed and your cruise may be forced to skip the port altogether.

Scoring the best excursions

Stingray City: The waters off Grand Cayman are home to Stingray City, one of the world's wackiest underwater attractions. Set in the very shallow waters of North Sound, about 2 miles east of the island's

northwestern tip, the site was discovered in the mid-1980s when local fishermen noticed that scores of stingrays were showing up to feed on the offal they dumped overboard. Today, anywhere from 30 to 100 relatively tame stingrays swarm around the hundreds of oohing and aahing snorkelers like so many aquatic basset hounds, eager for handouts. Stingrays are terribly gentle creatures, and love to have their bellies rubbed, but never try to grab one by the tail — their barbed stingers can inflict a lot of pain (2–3 hours; \$49–\$59).

Atlantis Deep-Dive Submarine: A real research sub takes two passengers at a time down to 800 feet to explore the Cayman Wall through a 3-foot viewing window. Powerful lights illuminate the sponge belt at 400 feet, and delicate coral and deep-sea creatures can be sighted even farther down (1½ hours, including a 55-minute dive; \$399).

Atlantis Submarine: For less dough, a 48-passenger sub takes you down to 100 feet through coral canyons, with an automatic fish feeder drawing swarms of colorful marine creatures (1½ hours, including a 45-minute dive; \$95).

Grand Cayman by Bicycle: Hop on a bike to work off all that cruise food, and check out the island's coastline to boot. Pick up your touring mountain bike at the Beach Club Colony Hotel, ride along the coastline for views of Seven Mile Beach, and then journey inland en route to the north side of the island to ride along the coast again (3 hours; \$59).

Exploring on your own

Taxis line up at the pier to meet cruise ship passengers. Fares are fixed; typical one-way fares range from \$12 to \$20. **Motor scooters** and **bicycles** are another way to get around. Soto Scooters Ltd. (Seven Mile Beach at Coconut Place; ☎ 345-945-4465) offers Honda Elite scooters and bicycles for about \$30 and \$15 daily.

Within walking distance: Hey, like, it isn't only about shopping. In George Town, check out the small but interesting **Cayman Islands National Museum** (Harbour Drive; ☎ 345-949-8368; www.museum.ky). Exhibits include Caymanian artifacts collected by Ira Thompson (beginning in the 1930s), and other items relating to the natural, social, and cultural history of the Caymans. Admission is \$5 (\$2.50 seniors); closed Sundays.



Beyond walking distance: The only green-sea-turtle farm of its kind in the world, **Cayman Turtle Farm**, at Northwest Point, just beyond the town of Hell (☎ 345-949-3894; www.turtle.ky), is the island's most popular land-based tourist attraction. Once a multitude of turtles lived in the waters surrounding the Cayman Islands (in fact, Christopher Columbus called the islands Las Tortugas because there were so many), but today these creatures are endangered. The turtle farm's purpose is twofold: to replenish the waters with hatchlings and yearling turtles, and to provide the local market with edible turtle meat. You can peer into

100 circular concrete tanks containing turtles ranging in size from 6 ounces to 600 pounds, and sample turtle dishes at a snack bar and restaurant. Admission is \$6.

And now, we'd like to tell you to go to **Hell!** Now don't get all offended on us; it's actually the name of a little town and a great place to buy some souvenir T-shirts for your most despised friends back home. You can also mail your postcards from here for the snarky postmark.

If you just want to flop on a towel and fry your skin, head for **Seven Mile Beach**, a strip of white sand just north of George Town. Lined with condominiums and plush resorts, it's an easy taxi ride from the cruise dock. Watersports are available, and so are lots of lunch places.



Do the right thing and don't purchase turtle or black-coral products. You'll see them everywhere, but it's illegal to bring them back into the United States and most other Western nations.

Grenada

One of Heidi's favorite Caribbean ports of call, this one-time British Crown Colony offers a little bit of everything — history, lush jungles, and great beaches. And it's not overrun with tourists. Plus, maybe you didn't know Grenada (pronounced gre-nay-dah) produces more spices than anywhere else in the world — including clove, cinnamon, mace, cocoa, tonka beans, ginger, and a third of the world's nutmeg — and thus its nickname, the Spice Island. **St. George's**, the country's capital, is one of the most colorful ports in the West Indies, nearly landlocked in the deep crater of a long-dead volcano, full of charming Georgian colonial buildings, and flanked by old forts. The island's coast is white and sandy; its interior is a jungle of palms, oleander, bougainvillea, and other tropical foliage, crisscrossed by roads and trails.

Grenada was one of the hardest hit Caribbean islands during 2004's devastating hurricane season. Almost every building sustained some level of damage, but you can't keep a good island down. Known for its lushness and most extravagant fertility (results of a gentle climate and volcanic soil), Grenada started springing back almost immediately, its coastal greenery growing back rapidly and its rain forests filling out a little more slowly.

English is commonly spoken on this island, and the official currency is the **Eastern Caribbean dollar** (EC\$2.70 = US\$1; EC\$1 = US37¢), though dollars are accepted commonly. Always determine which dollars — EC or U.S. — you're talking about when discussing a price.



You might remember when the U.S. military invaded the island in 1983 in one of its more bizarre Cold War excursions. But no worries, the likelihood of a superpower invading this tiny, harmless Grenada any time soon is pretty darn low.

Cruising into port

Ships either dock at a pier right in St. George's or anchor in the much-photographed harbor and send their passengers to the pier by tender. **The Carenage** (St. George's main street) is only a short walk away from the pier.

Scoring the best excursions

Because of Grenada's lush landscape, we recommend spending at least a few hours touring its interior, one of the most scenic in the West Indies.

Hike to Seven Sisters Waterfalls: After a 40-minute hike along a muddy path in the lush Grand Etang rain forest, passengers are free to take a swim in the natural pools or hop off the edge of the cascading waterfalls. It's gorgeous and lots of fun. Don't forget to wear your bathing suit and maybe a pair of water-friendly sandals (3½ hours; \$59).

Island Tour, Grand Etang Lake, and Fort Frederick: This is a great way to experience Grenada's lush, cool, dripping-wet tropical interior. Via bus, you travel past the red-tiled roofs of St. George's en route to the bright blue Grand Etang Lake, within an extinct volcanic crater some 570m (1,900 ft.) above sea level. On the way, you drive through rain forests and stop at a spice estate. Some tours include a visit to Annandale Falls and Fort Frederick (4½ hours; \$44).

Exploring on your own

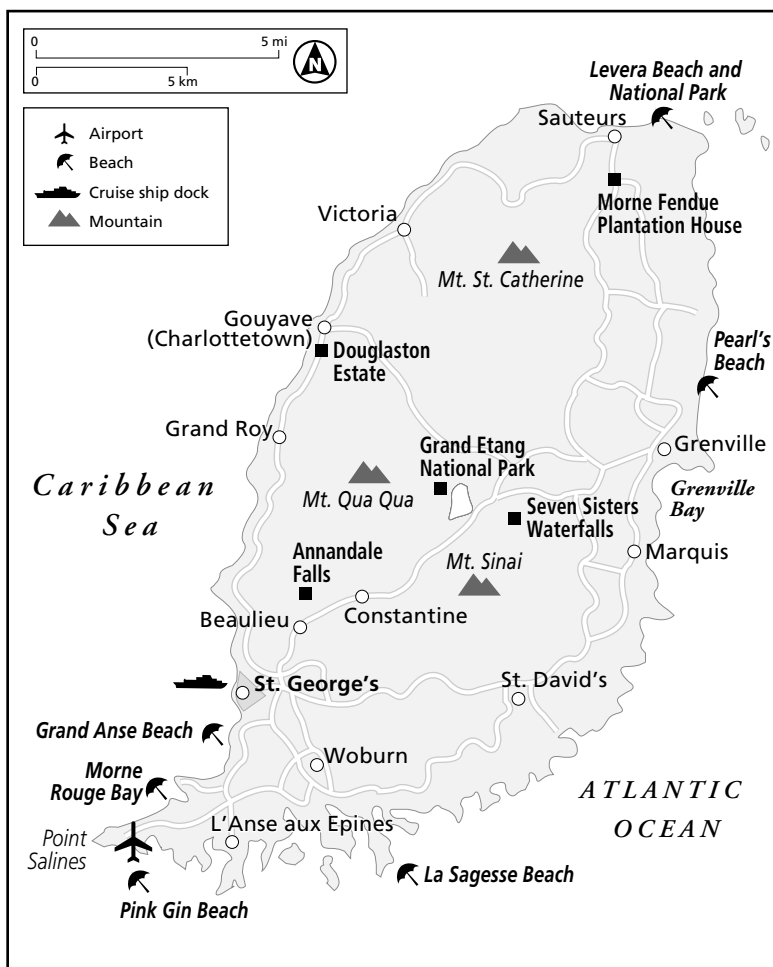
Taxi fares are set by the government. A one-way taxi to Grand Anse (one of the Caribbean's best beaches) is about \$15 for up to four passengers. You can also tap most taxi drivers as a guide for a day's sightseeing, for about \$25 per hour. **Water taxis** also head from the cruise ship welcome center to Grand Anse. Round-trip fare is about \$4.

Within walking distance: If you're up for a good hike and some awesome photo ops, walk around the historical Carenage from the cruise terminal in St. George's and head up to **Fort George**, built in 1705 by the French and originally called Fort Royal. While the fort ruins and the 200- to 300-year-old cannons are worth a peek, the 360-degree panoramic views of the entire harbor area are spectacular. You can pick up a rudimentary walking-tour map from the cruise terminal to help you find interesting sites along the way.

In town, you can also visit the **Grenada National Museum** (Young and Monckton Streets; ☎ 473-440-3725), set in the foundations of an old French army barracks and prison built in 1704. Small but interesting, check out stuff such as Joséphine Bonaparte's bathtub from her girlhood in Martinique. Admission is \$1.

Church Street, which leads right to the fort, has lots of quaint 18th- and 19th-century architecture as well as several 19th-century cathedrals and the island's Houses of Parliament.

Grenada



Beyond walking distance: You can take a taxi up Richmond Hill to **Fort Frederick**, which the French began in 1779. The British retook the island in 1783 and completed the fort in 1791. From its battlements, you'll have a panoramic view of the harbor and the yacht marina.

Don't miss the mountains northeast of St. George's. If you don't have much time, 15m (50-ft.) **Annandale Falls** is just a 15-minute drive away, on the outskirts of the **Grand Etang Forest Reserve**. You can swim and picnic surrounded by liana vines, elephant ears, and other tropical flora and spices — you'll swear you landed in Tahiti. If you have more time and want a less crowded spot, **Seven Sisters Waterfalls** are farther into

Grand Etang, an approximately 30-minute drive and then a mile hike through the beautiful tropical forest to the falls.

About 25 miles north of St. George's, at the 1912 **Morne Fendue Plantation House** (also known as Betty's) at St. Patrick's (☎ 473-442-9330), you can enjoy old-time island recipes while you dine as an upper-class family would have in the 1920s. A fixed-price (\$16) lunch is served Monday to Saturday from 12:30 to 3 p.m. Call for reservations.



Grenada's **Grand Anse Beach**, with its 3.2km (2 miles) of wide sugar-white sands, is one of the best in the Caribbean, with calm waters and a great view of St. George's. There are several restaurants beachside, and you can also join a banana-boat ride or rent a Sunfish sailboat.

Jamaica

Yah mon. Jamaica is a cool, racy place as islands go, and real popular with cruise ships, not to mention honeymooners and couples who flock to the island's all-inclusive resorts. The third largest of the Caribbean islands after Cuba and Hispaniola, Jamaica has dense jungle in its interior, mountains rising as high as 2,220m (7,400 ft.), and many beautiful white-sand beaches along its northern coast, where the cruise ships dock. Most head for **Ocho Rios**, although more are opting to call at the city of **Montego Bay** ("Mo Bay"), 108km (67 miles) to the west, with comparable attractions, excursions, and shopping possibilities.

One of the most densely populated nations in the Caribbean, with a vivid sense of its own identity, Jamaica has a history rooted in the plantation economy and some of the most impassioned politics in the Western Hemisphere, all of which leads to a sometimes turbulent day-to-day reality. You've probably heard, for example, that the island's vendors and hawkers can be pushy and the locals not always the most welcoming to tourists, and while there's definitely some truth to this, we've had mostly positive experiences, so keep an open mind.

The official language is **English**, but most Jamaicans speak a richly nuanced patois. The unit of currency is the **Jamaican dollar**, designated by the same symbol as the U.S. dollar (US\$1 = J\$61; J\$1 = US2¢). Visitors can pay in U.S. dollars, but always find out if a price is being quoted in Jamaican or U.S. dollars — though the huge difference probably makes it obvious.

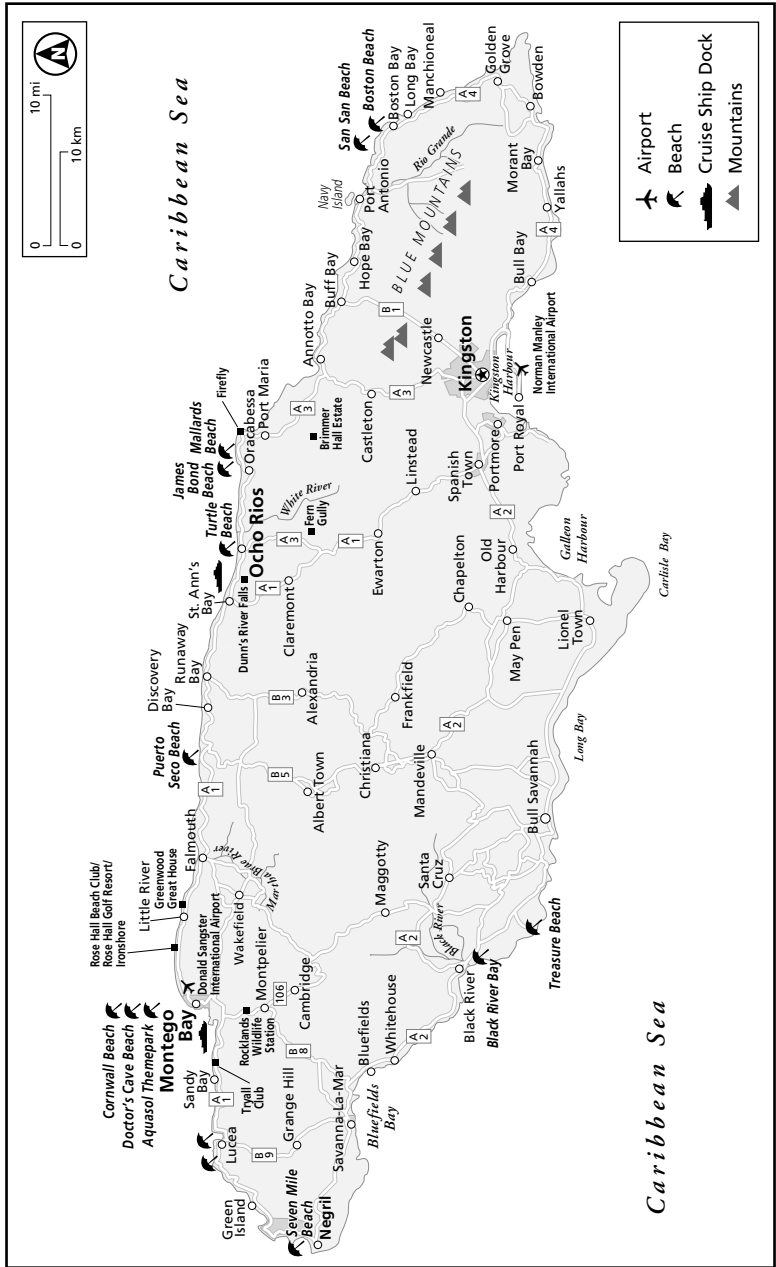
Cruising into port

Cruise ships dock at either the **Port of Ocho Rios**, near Dunn's River Falls and adjacent to Island Village and several shopping options, or at **Montego Bay**, where there's a modern cruise dock with the usual duty-free stores and tourist information.



You can walk to the shopping, but otherwise **taxis** are your best means of getting around on your own (definitely don't rent a car here). They'll be waiting for you at the pier. Taxis licensed by the government — and

Jamaica



you should only use one of these — display **JTB** decals, indicating they're official Jamaican Tourist Board taxis. Fixed rates are posted.

Scoring the best excursions

Because there's little besides shopping near the docks at either Ocho Rios or Montego Bay, most passengers sign up for shore excursions. The following are usually offered from both ports.

Dunn's River Falls Tour: Okay, they're totally touristy, crowded, and over-hyped, but we have to admit, climbing the falls is totally fun. Cascading 180m (600 ft.) to the beach, it's a ball to slip and slide your way up the falls with hundreds of others, forming a human chain of sorts. Wear a bathing suit under your clothes, and don't forget your waterproof camera and your aqua-socks. (If you do forget, most cruise lines rent aqua-socks for an extra \$5 or so.) The prettiest part of the falls, known as the Laughing Waters, was used in the James Bond classics *Dr. No* and *Live and Let Die*. Tour options often include visits to other sites and/or shopping. **Note:** The falls are much closer to Ocho Rios than to Mo Bay, so tours from the latter typically cost around \$70 and require a 2¼-hour drive each way, for a total of 7½ hours (4–4½ hours; \$45).

River Tubing Safari: This is one of the best excursions we've ever taken. After a scenic van ride deep into the pristine jungles, the group of 20 or so passengers and a couple of guides sit back into big black inner tubes and glide a few miles downriver, passing by gorgeous, towering bamboo trees and other lush foliage. The rapids are very tame; do this for the scenery and the fun of floating downstream on your bum! If you're docking in Ocho Rios, this tour is usually on the White River. If in Montego Bay, it's on the Great River. This trip is totally better than the **Martha Brae River Rafting**, which takes you down the river on two-seat bamboo rafts for about the same price (3½ hours; \$58).

Horseback-Riding Excursion: After a 45-minute ride from the stables through fields, you can gallop along the beach and take your horse bareback into the surf for a thrilling ride (3–3½ hours; \$89).

The following two popular excursions are typically offered from Mo Bay:

Rose Hall Great House: This is the most famous plantation home in Jamaica. Built about two centuries ago by John Palmer, it gained notoriety from the doings of "Infamous Annie" Palmer, wife of the builder's grandnephew, who supposedly dabbled in witchcraft and murder. Many Jamaicans insist the house is haunted (3 hours; \$43).

Greenwood Great House and Town Drive: More interesting to some than Rose Hall, this Georgian-style building was the residence of Richard Barrett, a first cousin of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. On display are the family's library, portraits, antiques, and period musical instruments (3½ hours; \$39).

Exploring on your own in Ocho Rios

The port at Ocho Rios is just a mile away from the major shopping area, Ocean Village Shopping Centre.

Once a small banana and fishing port, Ocho Rios is now Jamaica's cruise ship capital, welcoming a couple of ships every day during high season. Though the area has some of the Caribbean's most fabled resorts, and Dunn's River is just a five-minute taxi ride away, the town itself is not much to see, including the outdoor markets within walking distance. Don't expect to shop in the markets without a lot of hassle and a lot of very pushy hawking of merchandise — some of which is likely to be ganja (the wacky weed). In recent years, a fleet of blue-uniformed "resort patrol" on bikes has been helping keep order.

Within walking distance: Adjacent to the cruise pier, **Island Village** (www.islandjamaica.com) is a 4-acre entertainment and shopping complex developed by Island Records' Chris Blackwell. Attractions include the ReggaeXplosion museum, a museum of Jamaican art, a casino, an outdoor concert venue and indoor theater, a beach with watersports, and shopping (lots of it).

Beyond walking distance: Shore excursions are the best way to see popular sights such as **Dunn's River Falls** (see "Scoring the best excursions," earlier in this section).

The 1817 **Brimmer Hall Estate**, Port Maria, St. Mary's (☎ 876-994-2309), 34km (21 miles) east of Ocho Rios, is a working plantation where you're driven around in a tractor-drawn jitney to see the tropical fruit trees and coffee plants. It's really touristy, but a lot of people seem to like it. Most ships sell organized excursions here, or call ahead and arrange your own. Admission is \$15.

In the same general area, toward the coast, **Firefly**, Grants Pen, above Oracabessa (☎ 876-997-7201), was the home of Sir Noël Coward and his longtime companion, Graham Payn, who, as executor of Coward's estate, donated it to the Jamaica National Heritage Trust. The recently restored house is as it was on the day Sir Noël died in 1973. It's open Monday to Thursday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$10.

The cruise and hotel hordes descend upon **Mallards Beach**, at the Sunset Jamaica Grande (☎ 876-974-2201) on Main Street. Locals may steer you to the good and less-crowded **Turtle Beach**, southwest of Mallards. You may also want to check out the big **James Bond Beach** in Oracabessa, about 20 minutes from town. Bond author Ian Fleming's home, Goldeneye, is located nearby.

Exploring on your own in Montego Bay

Mo Bay, as it's called by insiders, has better beaches, shopping, and restaurants than Ocho Rios, as well as some of the best golf courses in the Caribbean — though it also has Ocho Rios' crime and traffic.

Within walking distance: One of the main shopping hubs is **Montego Freeport**, and it's within easy walking distance of the pier. Otherwise, you have to take a taxi or book an organized tour to see anything.

Beyond walking distance: If you're not taking a shore excursion, consider a visit to **Rocklands Wildlife Station**, Anchovy, St. James (☎ 876-952-2009). Lisa Salmon, known as the "Bird Lady of Anchovy," established this sanctuary, which is perfect for nature lovers and bird-watchers. You can feed small doves and finches from your hand, and with luck you can coax a Jamaican doctor bird to perch on your finger and drink syrup. Rocklands is about 1.2km (¾ mile) outside Anchovy on the road from Montego Bay. Admission is \$8.

To beach it, head for **Doctor's Cave Beach** (Gloucester Avenue across from the Doctor's Cave Beach Hotel; ☎ 876-952-4355; www.doctorscave.com), which helped launch Mo Bay as a resort in the 1940s. One of the premier beaches of Jamaica, **Aquasol Theme Park** (formerly Walter Fletcher Beach), is in the heart of Mo Bay; its tranquil waters are very family friendly. On the main road 18km (11 miles) east of Montego Bay, the half-mile **Rose Hall Beach Club** (☎ 876-680-0969) is a secure, secluded, white sandy beach, offering crystal-clear water, a full restaurant, two beach bars, and more. All of these beaches charge admission, which runs between about \$4 and \$8.

If you'd rather eat than roast in the sun, beeline it to **The Pork Pit** (27 Gloucester Ave.; ☎ 876-952-1046), the best place to go for the famous Jamaican jerk pork and jerk chicken. Prices are very reasonable. Lunch costs \$10.

If golf is your bag, there are several excellent 18-hole, par-71 or -72 courses, some with ocean views. If your ship doesn't have an excursion there, call ahead and then get there via taxi. Courses include **Tryall Club** (☎ 876-956-5660; www.tryallclub.com; greens fees \$145), 19km (12 miles) from Montego Bay; ultrascenic **Wyndham Rose Hall Golf & Beach Resort**, Rose Hall (☎ 876-953-2650; greens fees \$125), once featured in a James Bond movie; **Half Moon**, at Rose Hall (☎ 876-953-2560; www.halfmoon-resort.com/golf; greens fees \$130); and **Ironshore Golf & Country Club**, Ironshore, St. James, Montego Bay (☎ 876-953-3681; greens fees \$30–\$50).

Key West, Florida

If you like booz'n and browsing for tacky souvenirs, with a little history thrown in for good measure, then cool Key West will do you just fine. Located at the very end of the Florida Keys, Key West is America's southernmost city and one of its most fun-loving and goofy. It's part Caribbean outpost with a dash of New Orleans–style high life. There are plenty of Hemingway look-alikes, a large gay community, and tons of tourists shuffling around with smiles on their faces. The proximity of most attractions to the cruise docks means there's little sense in taking an excursion here unless you have mobility problems. Wander around

Key West



touristy Mallory Square and Duval Street, check out some of the theme bars, and then take a walk down some of the quieter side streets, maybe visiting Truman's Little White House or the Hemingway House museum. Or spend your day playing golf, diving, or snorkeling. Several raw bars near the dock area offer seafood, including oysters and clams, although the king here is conch — served grilled, ground into burgers, made into chowder, fried in batter as fritters, or served raw in a salad.

You're in Florida, so the U.S. dollar is the official currency and English is the language.

Cruising into port

Ships dock at **Mallory Square** (Old Town's tourist central), at the nearby Hilton Resort's **Pier B**, and at the U.S. Navy base's "**Outer Mole**" pier. All are on the Gulf side of the island. Passengers arriving at the Navy pier must take an official shuttle bus the short distance to and from Mallory Square, as individuals are not permitted to transit the base on their own.

Scoring the best excursions

In addition to the Conch Tour Train described in the next section, most lines offer walking tours and sometimes bike tours for those who like the services of a guide. But, this is really a port to explore on your own, with the exception of booze cruises.

Key West Catamaran Sail and Snorkel Tour: The popular Fury catamarans take passengers to a reef for some snorkeling and then finish the trip back to shore with music, booze, and a good time (3–3½ hours; \$44).

Exploring on your own

Within walking distance: The flat island is only 4 miles long and 2 miles wide, so getting around is easy. The most popular attractions are within walking distance of Mallory Square, at most a 20-minute walk. The farthest is Hemingway House, about a mile down Duval. Many passengers opt for one of the island's tram tours, which are sold as shore excursions but are also available on a walk-up basis. Shopping is available everywhere you look, and mostly of the flamingo snow globes, T-shirt, and floppy straw hats variety.

The **Conch Tour Train** (☎ 305-296-4444; www.conchtourtrain.com) is a narrated 90-minute tour that offers commentary on 100 local sites. The depot is located at Mallory Square, and trains depart every 30 minutes (\$20 adults, \$10 children 4–12, free 3 and under). The trip has only one stop where passengers can get on and off (at the Historic Seaport). If you want more flexibility, try the **Old Town Trolley** (☎ 305-296-6688; www.trolleytours.com), which allows you to hop on and off its trains to explore on your own. Prices are the same as the Conch Train, and pickup stops are signposted around town.

If you want wheels of your own, **bicycles and motor scooters** are a good bet here, and are widely available, with daily rates hovering around \$12 and \$45, respectively.

Depending on your degree of thirst, the most important sightseeing may be Key West's many bars. They're big, are often packed, and typically feature someone playing guitar and singing the hits in one corner. Most serve basic chow too. **Captain Tony's Saloon** (428 Greene St.; ☎ 305-294-1838) is the oldest active bar in Florida — Hemingway drank here and Jimmy Buffett got his start here, what better drinking credentials could you have? **Sloppy Joe's** (201 Duval St.; ☎ 305-294-5717) is the most touristy bar in Key West. **Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville** (500 Duval St.; ☎ 305-296-3070) is kind of a refugee from Branson, Missouri, but if you've got a hankering for a cheeseburger from paradise or want to waste away again on margaritas, this is your place. Much less commercial is the open-air — and raucous and loud — **Hog's Breath Saloon** (400 Front St.; ☎ 305-296-4222) near the cruise docks.

The **Harry S. Truman Little White House** (111 Front St.; ☎ 305-294-9911; www.trumanlittlewhitehouse.com) served as Truman's vacation

home during his presidency and remains just as he left it, decorated in late 1940s style. Guides lead a well-organized hour-long tour. Admission is \$10.

Hemingway Home (907 Whitehead St.; ☎ 305-294-1136; www.hemingwayhome.com) provides a similar if less formal look back at the island's old days. "Papa" lived here with his second wife, Pauline, completing *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *A Farewell to Arms* in the studio annex out back. Hemingway had some 60 polydactyl (many-toed) cats, whose descendants still live on the grounds. Admission is \$11.

Audubon House and Tropical Garden (205 Whitehead St., at Greene St.; ☎ 877-281-2473 or 305-294-2116; www.audubonhouse.com) is dedicated to the 1832 Key West sojourn of the famous naturalist John James Audubon. The main reason to visit is to see how wealthy sailors lived in Key West in the 19th century, and the lush tropical gardens surrounding the house. Admission is \$10.

The Heritage House Museum and Robert Frost Cottage (410 Caroline St.; ☎ 305-296-3573; www.heritagehousemuseum.org) was the home of Jessie Porter Newton, the grande dame of Key West. Today her home is filled with mementos of the illustrious guests who partook of her hospitality, including Tennessee Williams, Gloria Swanson, and Robert Frost, who stayed in a cottage out back.

On the waterfront at Mallory Square, the **Key West Aquarium** (1 Whitehead St.; ☎ 305-296-2051; www.keywestaquarium.com), in operation since 1932, was the first tourist attraction built in the Florida Keys. Admission is \$9.

Near the docks, the **Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society Museum** (200 Greene St.; ☎ 305-294-2633; www.melfisher.com) contains some of the more than \$400 million in gold jewelry, doubloons, and other artifacts the late treasure hunter Mel Fisher plucked from the Spanish galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, which sunk off the Keys in 1622. Admission is \$10.

Nancy Forrester's Secret Garden (1 Free School Lane, off Simonton between Southard and Fleming Streets; ☎ 305-294-0015) is the most lavish and verdant garden in town, with some 150 species of palms and thousands of orchids, climbing vines, and ground covers. Admission is \$6.

This town is not known for beaches, but if you insist, the best of the mediocre is **Fort Zachary Taylor State Beach** (☎ 305-292-6713), a 12-minute walk from the docks. To get there, go through the gates leading into the Truman Annex (site of the Little White House).

Martinique

Frenchies and Francophiles will appreciate Martinique's history. The island, an overseas department of France since 1946, was the birthplace and childhood home of Empress Joséphine, sweetheart and wife of

Napoleon. Martinique is also on the map for a horrific volcano that devastated St-Pierre in 1902. Within minutes, some 30,000 souls perished. Love and death make quite a one-two punch, but they're just the hook. Look a bit deeper to appreciate Martinique's subtler attractions — quaint seaside villages, colonial ruins dating to when France and England vied for the island, and captivatingly beautiful rain forests and beaches.

French is Martinique's official language, but you can get by with **English** at most restaurants and tourist sites. Martinique is an overseas region of France, so the **euro** (€) is the official currency (1€ = US\$1.30; US\$1 = .77€). U.S. dollars are commonly accepted in tourist areas.

Cruising into port

Most cruise ships dock in the heart of Fort-de-France, at the **Pointe Simon Cruise Dock**, which has quays for two large vessels. Because Martinique is a popular port of call, ships may also dock at the **Passenger Terminal** at the main harbor, a nondescript cargo port on the north side of the bay, a \$10 cab ride from the center of town.

Scoring the best excursions

Rainforest and Plantations 4WD Safari: Take your off-road vehicle through tropical forests and sugar-cane plantations (stopping to sample the crop) to a banana plantation and a distillery where you do short tours (4 hours; \$84).

Martinique Snorkeling: Across the bay from Fort-de-France, the reef at Anse Dufour offers excellent snorkeling for experts and novices. The reef is filled with marine animals, including French grunts, blackbar soldierfish, and silversides. Snorkeling equipment is provided, as are professional instruction, supervision, and transportation (3 hours; \$49).

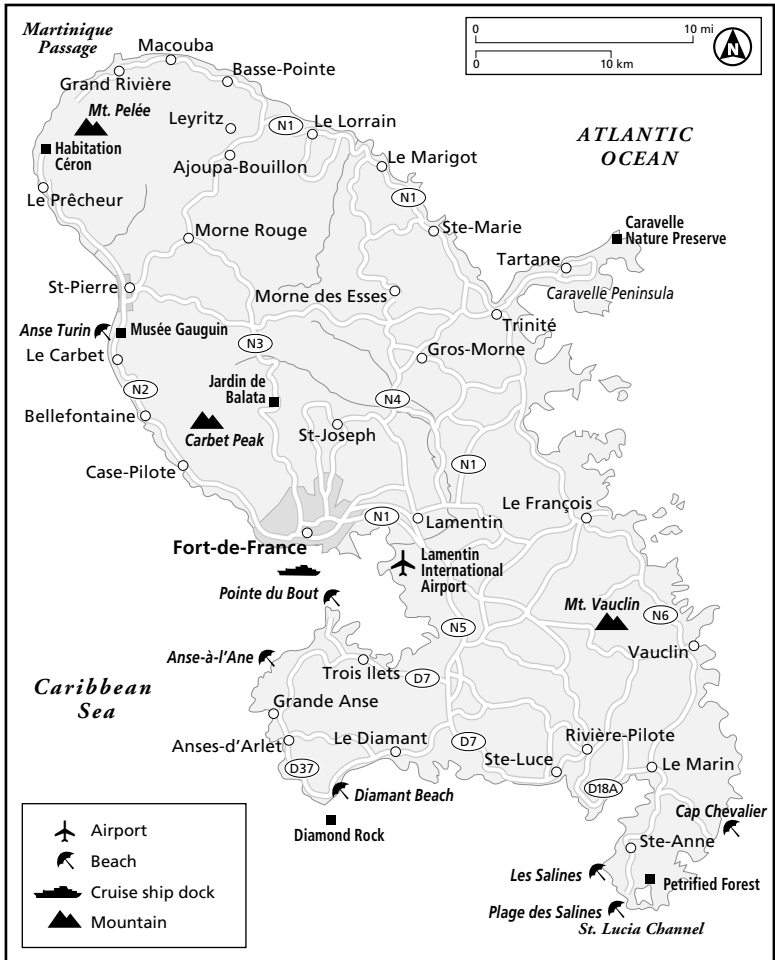
Exploring on your own

Travel by **taxi** is convenient but expensive. Most cabs are metered, and you can find them waiting at the cruise pier. To cross the bay to La Pagerie (Empress Joséphine's birthplace) and the resort area of Pointe du Bout, take one of the blue **ferries** that sail from east of the cruise dock in Fort-de-France at least once per hour. Round-trip tickets cost about 6€ (\$7.80). Avis, Budget, and Hertz all offer **rental cars**, too.

Within walking distance: A bustling town of 100,000 residents, **Fort-de-France** is a sea of ochre buildings, cascading flowers, and tall palm trees. The town's narrow streets, cluttered with boutiques and cafes, climb from the bowl of the sea to the surrounding hills, forming a great urban amphitheater. There's plenty here to keep you busy.

At the eastern end of downtown, **La Savane** is a broad formal park with palms, mangoes, and manicured lawns, perfect for a promenade or rest in the shade. Its most famous feature is the **Statue of Empress Joséphine**, carved in 1858 by Vital Dubray and unceremoniously decapitated in 1995

Martinique



in commemoration of her role in reinstating slavery on the island in the early 1800s.

Across the street, **Bibliothèque Schoelcher** (Schoelcher Library; ☎ 596-70-26-67) is one of Fort-de-France's great Belle Epoque buildings. Named in honor of Victor Schoelcher, one of France's most influential abolitionists, it houses his books and other documents. Admission is free; closed Sunday.

Another Henri Pick masterpiece, **St. Louis Cathedral**, on rue Victor Schoelcher at rue Blénac, was built in 1895. Check out the organ,

stained-glass windows, and ornamented interior walls. They can be viewed every morning except Saturday.

Built in 1640, **Fort St. Louis**, Boulevard Alfassa, dominates the rocky promontory east of La Savane. It first defended Fort-de-France in 1674 against Dutch invaders, and today, remains the French navy's headquarters in the Caribbean. It is open to visitors only on special occasions.

The best of Fort-de-France's many museums, the **Musée Départemental d'Archéologie Précolombienne Préhistoire** (9 rue de la Liberté; ☎ 596-71-57-05), traces 2,000 years of Martinique's pre-Columbian past with more than a thousand relics from the Arawak and Carib cultures. Admission is 3.45€ (\$4.50); closed Sunday.



You can expect to find great food all over town if you want to stop for lunch, and more than any other island in the French West Indies, Martinique gives French and Creole cuisine equal billing.

Beyond walking distance: Too large to tackle in a single day, you have to pick and choose among the island's many museums, plantations, floral parks, and natural wonders to visit.

Martinique's Carib name, Madiana, means "island of flowers." To see what the Caribs were talking about, stroll through the **Jardin de Balata** (☎ 596-64-48-73). Located about 8km (5 miles) north of town, this lush, Edenic garden showcases 200 species of plants, trees, and tropical flowers, as well as resident hummingbirds, frogs, and lizards. Admission is 6.50€ (\$8.45).

One of Martinique's must-see attractions, the village of **St-Pierre** on the northwest coast, was the cultural and economic capital of the island until 8 a.m. on May 8, 1902, when the **Mount Pelée** volcano exploded in fire and lava. Three minutes later, all but one of St-Pierre's 30,000 inhabitants had been incinerated, buried in ash and lava, or asphyxiated by poisonous gas. The town once hailed as the "Paris of the Antilles" became "the Pompeii of the Caribbean," and today it's no more than a sleepy fishing village, home to fewer than 5,000 souls. Ruins of a church, theater, and other buildings punctuate the town, memorials to St-Pierre's former glory. The one-room **Musée Volcanologique** (rue Victor Hugo; ☎ 596-78-15-16) traces the story of the cataclysm through pictures and relics excavated from the debris. Admission is 2€ (\$3.60).

Part sugar-plantation ruins, part tropical paradise, **Habitation Céron** (☎ 596-52-94-53) is the most evocative of Martinique's historical agricultural sites. This sprawling 17th-century estate, 15 minutes north of St-Pierre, is almost as wild and tranquil as the surrounding rain forest, but its verdigris cisterns, moss-covered stone buildings, and archaic, still functioning water mill are all haunted with the ghosts of a time when sugar was king. Admission is 6€ (\$7.80).

A few miles south of St-Pierre, **Le Carbet** is where Columbus landed in 1502, where the first French settlers arrived in 1635, and where the French painter Paul Gauguin lived for five months in 1887. At the site is the tiny **Musée Paul Gauguin**, Anse Turin (☎ 596-78-22-66), though there are no original paintings. Admission is 4€ (\$5.20).

Marie Josèphe Rose Tascher de la Pagerie was born in 1763 in the quaint little village of **Trois Ilets**, across the bay from Fort-de-France. As Joséphine, she became the wife of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1796 and Empress of France in 1804. A small museum, the **Musée de la Pagerie** (☎ 596-68-33-06), sits in the former estate kitchen building, where Joséphine gossiped with her slaves. Admission costs 3€ (\$3.90).

You'll have passed through a number of quaint coastal villages by this time but none sweeter than **Ste-Luce**. Absurdly picturesque with its blindingly white stucco walls, red-tile roofs, turquoise sea, and multi-colored fishing boats, swim or snorkel off the small, pleasant beach, or just chill out.

Other beaches for bumming around include **Grand Anse des Salines**, just south of Fort-de-France and widely regarded as Martinique's nicest strand. To get to the island's main **gay beach**, turn right at the entrance to Grand Anse des Salines and drive to the far end of the parking lot, near the sign for Petite Anse des Salines. Follow the path through the woods and then veer left till you find the quiet section with the good-looking guys.

Conveniently located across the bay from Fort-de-France, **Pointe du Bout** is Martinique's most lavish resort area. Aside from a marina and a variety of watersports, the area has some modest man-made, white-sand beaches. The sandy, natural beaches at nearby **Anse Mitan** and **Anses d'Arlet** are popular with both swimmers and snorkelers.

Beaches north of Fort-de-France have mostly gray (they like to call it silver) volcanic sand. The best of the bunch is **Anse Turin**, just to the side of the main Caribbean coastal road, between St-Pierre and Le Carbet. Extremely popular with locals and shaded by palms, it's where Gauguin swam when he called the island home.



Martinique has no legal nudist beaches, but toplessness is as common here as anywhere in France.

Puerto Rico

San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, is a bustling port that easily sees five to ten ships a day. Many ships use San Juan as an embarkation port; others visit as a port of call. The San Juan metropolitan area, home to about a third of Puerto Rico's 3.8 million people, is one of the largest and most sophisticated urban centers in the Caribbean. The docks are right at the foot of **Old San Juan**, which is popular with cruise passengers

also because it's the most beautiful, historic part of town. The neighborhood's hilly cobblestone streets are lined with brightly painted colonial townhouses, colonial churches, intimate parks, and sun-drenched plazas as well as restaurants and shops (U.S. citizens don't pay taxes here). Like the pyramids of Egypt and the Great Wall of China, Old San Juan's Spanish colonial forts and city walls are United Nations World Heritage Sites, and our top pick here.

Spanish is the native tongue, but most people on the island also speak **English** (both are official languages here). The farther you venture from San Juan, the more likely it is you'll have to practice your Spanish. Because Puerto Rico is part of the United States, the U.S. dollar is the coin of the realm.

Cruising into port

Almost all cruise ships dock at Old San Juan, but during periods of heavy volume, you may dock at one of the much less convenient cargo piers across the water from the old town, requiring a short taxi ride.

Scoring the best excursions

Unless you want a guide to offer historical perspective (2½ hours; \$33), don't bother with organized walking tours of Old San Juan — it's easy enough to get around on your own (pick up a walking tour map in the terminal). On the other hand, if you explore somewhere farther afield, an organized tour is a good idea.

El Yunque Rainforest: Though you wouldn't know it from San Juan's hustle-bustle, Puerto Rico has a natural side too. After arriving at Baño Grande, a natural swimming hole, hike half an hour along the Caimitillo Trail and see parrot nests, giant ferns, orchids, and palms. Listen for the song of Puerto Rico's national symbol, the tiny coquí tree frog (4–5 hours; \$35).

Rainforest Horseback Adventure: Meet your horse, briefly learn the ropes, and then ride along a beautiful beach. Take a quick swim during the refreshment stop (3½ hours; \$79–\$82).

City Tour and Bacardi Rum Distillery: After a tour of the old city, with a stop at Fort San Cristóbal, you'll travel to the Bacardi distillery to learn about the Puerto Rican sugar and rum industries, watch giant fermenting tanks transform sugar cane into rum, learn how to pronounce the product's name (baa-carrrr-di!), and then get a taste for yourself (4 hours; \$30).

Exploring on your own

Old San Juan beckons the walker to explore its hilly streets. **Taxis** operated by the Tourist Transportation Division are available at the piers. They're metered in San Juan, but the fare structure between major tourism zones is standardized.

Within walking distance: Walking the cobblestone streets of the historic landmark area of Old San Juan, you sense five centuries of history as you pass many of Puerto Rico's top historical attractions. You also find shops and cafes on any walking tour.

One must-see attraction is **El Morro** (Castillo de San Felipe del Morro) — indeed, you can't miss it as it sits at the top of a hill at the tip of the city. Its walls are part of a network of defenses that made San Juan a walled city, and for centuries, the fortress was considered impregnable. Here, Spanish Puerto Rico defended itself against the navies of Great Britain, France, and Holland, as well as against hundreds of pirate ships. The National Park Service maintains both El Morro and **Fort San Cristóbal**, located less than a mile east along the north coast.

Other varied and interesting sites include **La Fortaleza and Mansion Ejecutiva**, the centuries-old residence of the Puerto Rican governor; **Plaza de Armas**, the most beautiful of the squares in Old Town, flanked by the neoclassic **Intendencia**, which houses offices of the State Department and San Juan's historic City Hall; **La Casa Blanca**, which the son-in-law of Juan Ponce de León built as the great explorer's island home (although he never lived there); and **La Princesa**, once the most-feared prison in the Caribbean. The *Puerto Rican Academy of Fine Arts* is at the **Antiguo Monicomio Insular** (originally built in 1854 as an insane asylum). The nearby **Asilo de Beneficencia**, or "Home for the Poor," is a stately neoclassical building dating to the 1840s.

In the **Plaza de San José**, the statue of explorer Juan Ponce de León was cast from an English cannon captured during a naval battle in 1797. Dominicans established the **Iglesia de San José**, the church for which the plaza is named, in 1523. Several other historic buildings surround the plaza, including the **Museo de Pablo Casals**, which honors the Spanish-born cellist who lived his final years in Puerto Rico, and a former 17th-century convent, **El Convento**, which has been converted into one of the few hotels within the Old City. The **Catedral de San Juan**, Puerto Rico's most famous church, is across the street. You can also visit **Capilla de Cristo**, a tiny chapel with a silver altar dedicated to the Christ of Miracles. Also not far from the plaza, the **Cuartel de Ballajá** houses the **Museum of the Americas** on its second floor.

Beyond walking distance: Perhaps the most famous beach in the Caribbean, **Condado Beach**, at the western end of Ashford Avenue, is the backyard playground of Condado's resort hotels. A favorite of families, it can get pretty crowded in winter. The beaches of **Isla Verde**, behind the hotels and condominiums along Isla Verde Avenue, are less rocky and are excellent for people-watching. Both have white sand, palm trees, watersports, and plenty of eating and drinking options.

If you're more of a gambler than a sunbather, casinos are one of San Juan's biggest draws, and most large hotels have one. They're generally open daily from noon to 4 a.m., but some never close. There's the plush **Casino at the Ritz-Carlton** (6961 State Rd., Isla Verde; ☎ 800-241-3333

or 787-253-1700); the elegant **InterContinental San Juan** (187 Isla Verde Ave.; ☎ 800-303-1758 or 787-791-6100); and, the most convenient for cruise ship passengers, the **Sheraton Old San Juan Hotel & Casino** (100 Brumbaugh St.; ☎ 800-325-3535 or 787-721-5100), is directly across from Pier 3 and often bustling.

Golf is also an option, just be sure to sign up for a ship excursion or plan on renting a car to get to the courses, which include the well-regarded **Hyatt Dorado Beach Resort & Country Club** (☎ 787-796-8961; www.hyatt.com), **Palmas del Mar & Villas Golf Club** (☎ 787-285-2256; www.palmascountryclub.com), and **The Westin Rio Mar Golf Resort & Spa** (☎ 787-888-6000; www.westinriomar.com). Greens fees at each range from \$130 to \$190.

St. Barthélemy (St. Barts)

Chic, sophisticated St. Barts (or, technically, St. Barthélemy, a name no one ever uses) is internationally renowned as one of the ritziest refuges in the Caribbean, rivaled only by Mustique as the preferred island retreat of the rich and famous. Yet despite all the hoopla, St. Barts retains its charm, serenity, natural beauty, and incredibly French flavor — in contrast to most Caribbean islands, where descendants of African slaves form the majority, St. Barts's 7,000 year-round residents are primarily of French ancestry. Gustavia, the main port (whose name harks back to the 19th century, when Sweden controlled the island), is full of French restaurants and semi-chic, semi-boho nightspots. Many of the small luxe ships that call here stay into the evening so that passengers can get a night out. Away from town, the island is full of dramatic hills and pristine white-sand beaches.

French is the official language, but virtually everyone speaks **English** as well. St. Barts is part of the French overseas region of Guadeloupe, so the **euro** (€) is the official currency (1€ = US\$1.30; \$1 = .77€). U.S. dollars are commonly accepted.

Cruising into port

Cruise ships anchor off **Gustavia**, the main town, and ferry passengers to the dollhouse-size harbor and town via tenders.

Scoring the best excursions

Jet-Set Boat and Beach Excursion: Circumnavigate St. Barts in a 40-foot cruiser, then tender ashore at St. Jean Beach for a swim, snorkel, and/or drinks from the open bar (4 hours; \$200–\$400).

St. Barts on Horseback: Travel to northern St. Barts for a relaxed guided ride through the island's outback (2 hours; \$65).

Exploring on your own

Taxis congregate at Gustavia's harbor to take cruise passengers to the beaches. If you want some adventure, rent a **Smart Car**, the latest toys

St. Barthélemy (St. Barts)



on the island — they come in all kinds of bright colors — for a ride up and down St. Barts’s picturesque, hilly roads. Budget, Avis, Hertz, and National have offices here.

Within walking distance: For a taste of the island’s celeb vibe, make a beeline to **Le Select** (rue de la France at rue du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 590-27-86-87), the epicenter of Gustavia’s social life for more than 50 years. This cafe’s tables rest in a tree-shaded garden a block from the harbor. The classic, funky ambience inspired Jimmy Buffett’s “Cheeseburger in Paradise,” and a mix of salty locals, celebrities, and chic tourists typically make up the clientele. Aside from hanging out, shopping, and eating, cruisers sticking close to port can also visit Gustavia’s modest points of interest: **St. Bartholomew’s Church**, rue Samuel Fahlberg, dates from the 1850s, and the **Municipal Museum**, on rue Duquesne, across from the dock (☎ 590-29-71-55), is an unfocused but respectable introduction to the island. Admission is 2€ (\$2.60); closed Saturday afternoon and Monday morning.

Beyond walking distance: For a little culture, the tiny fishing village of **Corossol** is a step back in time. About 10 minutes by taxi from the dock, this quaint, totally un-chic hamlet is home to traditional folk who still live off the sea. On the town's waterfront, just to the left of the road from Gustavia, the **Inter Oceans Museum** (☎ 590-27-62-97) catalogs thousands of shells, corals, sand dollars, sea horses, sea urchins, and fish from around the world, all displayed in endearingly homemade style. Admission is 3€ (\$3.90); closed Mondays.

The most famous of the island's 22 beaches is **St-Jean**, where you can enjoy watersports, beach restaurants, and a few hotels. **Grand Cul de Sac** offers a similar active vibe. If you want peace and privacy, the best secluded beaches include **Marigot** and **Colombier** to the north, and **Grande Saline** and **Gouverneur** to the south (which is very remote). Topless sunbathing is quite common and at Saline, you may also see a lot of people in their altogether, even though nudity is officially forbidden).

St. Kitts

St. Kitts is almost ridiculously lush and fertile, dotted with rain forests and waterfalls and boasting some lovely beaches along its southeast coastline, but it's also extremely poor, still dependent on the same sugar-cane crop that brought its English plantation owners riches (and its slaves hot misery) back in colonial days. Cane fields climb the slopes of its volcanic mountain range, and you'll see ruins of old mills and plantation houses as you drive around the island. Basseterre, the capital city, is full of old-time colonial architecture, but it's a small-scale place with little to offer visitors beyond a pleasant walk-around. The island's most impressive landmark, **Brimstone Hill Fortress**, is about 15km (9 miles) west of town. St. Kitts forms the larger and more populated half of the combined Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis, two islands separated by only about 3.2km (2 miles) of ocean.

English is the language of both islands. The local currency is the **Eastern Caribbean dollar** (US\$1 = EC\$2.70; EC\$1 = US37¢). Many shops and restaurants quote prices in U.S. dollars. Always determine which currency locals are talking about.

Cruising into port

Port Zante stretches from the center of town into the deep waters offshore, with shopping, restaurants, and a welcome center on-site. New additions to the facility, including a second pier and expanded shopping, were due to be completed soon after this book hit the shelves.

Scoring the best excursions

Brimstone Hill Fortress and Romney Gardens: Among the largest and best-preserved forts in the Caribbean, **Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park** (www.brimstonehillfortress.org) dates from 1690, when the British fortified the hill to help recapture Fort Charles from the French.

St. Kitts



In 1782, an invading force of 8,000 French troops bombarded the fortress for a month before its small British garrison, supplemented by local militia, surrendered. When the British took the island back the next year, they proceeded to enlarge the fort into “The Gibraltar of the West Indies.” In all, the structure took 104 years to complete. Today it’s the centerpiece of a national park crisscrossed by nature trails, with a population of green vervet monkeys to keep things lively. Tours typically include a visit to the beautiful **Romney Gardens**, located amidst the ruins of a sugar estate between Basseterre and the fort. You can check out the lush hillside gardens, featuring giant ferns, orchids, poinsettias, and “The Tree,” a 350-year-old Saman tree (3 hours; \$46).

Mountain Biking and Beach Tour: From the pier, you ride through Basseterre then out through sugar-cane fields and up 450m (1,500-ft.) Olivees Mountain for views and refreshments. After the ride down, you stop at Friar's Bay for a swim and snack. It's a nice way to see this lush island (4 hours; \$71).

Rainforest and Gardens Hiking Safari: Departing from Romney Gardens, you hike along a loop of trails through lush rain forest. With luck, you can catch sight of some of the island's resident monkeys (4 hours; \$59).

Exploring on your own

You can walk around Basseterre, but you need a **taxi** to get anywhere else. They greet cruise passengers (loudly) at the docks and also around the Circus, a public square near the docks at the intersection of Bank and Fort streets. Taxis aren't metered, so you must agree on the price before heading out. Always ask if the rates quoted are in U.S. dollars or Eastern Caribbean dollars.

Within walking distance: The capital city of Basseterre, where the docks are located, has typical British colonial architecture and some quaint buildings, a few shops, and a market where locals display fruits and flowers — but even this description may give you the wrong idea about this place. The truth is, it's a very poor town, with few attractions aimed at visitors. When we were last there, there were chickens walking around in front of the government buildings. **St. George's Anglican Church**, on Cayon Street (walk straight up Church St. or Fort St. from the dock), is the oldest church in town and is worth a look. **Independence Square**, a stone's throw from the docks along Bank Street, is pretty, with its central fountain and old church, but there's no good reason to linger unless it's to sit in the shade and toss back a bottle of Ting, the local grapefruit-based soda.

The narrow peninsula in the southeast is where you find the best beaches and swimming, including **Conaree Beach**, 4.8km (3 miles) from Basseterre; **Frigate Bay**, with its talcum-powder-fine sand; the twin beaches of **Banana Bay** and **Cockleshell Bay**, at the southeast corner of the island; and **Friar's Bay**, a peninsula beach opening onto both the Atlantic and the Caribbean.

Beyond walking distance: All the best stuff to do outside of town is covered in "Scoring the best excursions," earlier in this section.



To experience the sweeter side of St. Kitts, try a stalk of sugar cane. Buy one from any farmer, peel it, and chew the inner reeds to enjoy the sweet juice. Try it with ice and a splash of rum.

St. Lucia

Of all the islands in the Caribbean, St. Lucia is most likely to make you think you're in the South Pacific, with its green mountains, the peaks of **Petit Piton** and **Gros Piton**, and the brilliant white sandy beaches along

the northwest coast. **Castries**, the capital, has grown up around an extinct volcanic crater that's now a large harbor surrounded by hills. It looks more modern than other regional capitals because fires destroyed many of the original French colonial and Victorian buildings typical of the region's architecture. But at its heart, Castries is still very traditional. The country women dress in traditional cotton headdresses to sell their luscious fruits and vegetables, while weather-beaten men sit close by playing warrie (a fast game played with pebbles on a carved board) or fleet games of dominoes using tiles the color of cherries.

English is the official language. The official currency is the **Eastern Caribbean dollar** (US\$1 = EC\$2.70; EC\$1 = US37¢), though shops and restaurants commonly take the U.S. dollar as well. Be sure you know which currency a price is being quoted in before paying.

Cruising into port

Most cruise ships arrive at a fairly new pier at **Pointe Seraphine**, within walking distance of the center of Castries and boasting St. Lucia's best shopping. In the unlikely event that Pointe Seraphine is full, your ship may dock instead at **Port Castries** on the other side of the colorful harbor. There's a shopping terminal here called La Place Carenage. Some smaller lines, such as Star Clippers, Seabourn, and Clipper, visit other sites around the island, anchoring off **Rodney Bay** to the north or **Soufrière** to the south and carrying passengers ashore by tender.

Scoring the best excursions

Pigeon Island Sea Kayaking: After transferring to Rodney Bay, you make the approximately 30-minute paddle out to the island, where you have time to swim, kayak some more, or make the steep climb up to Fort Rodney (3 hours; \$65–\$70).

Rainforest Bicycle Tour: Ride past banana plantations and the Errard Falls waterfall, and stop to sample various fruits that grow along the roadside (4½ hours; \$69). A different tour, **Jungle Mountain Biking**, takes you by boat to the Jungle Biking facility, located on an 18th-century sugar plantation. There, you can explore 16km (10 miles) of trails at your own pace (4½ hours; \$99).

Sooty Nature Hike and Mineral Waterfall: Drive along the west coast through fishing villages and banana plantations, before arriving at Soufrière, location of the Pitons and the Diamond Botanical Gardens, Waterfall, and Mineral Baths. A guided hour-long hike through the volcanic forest introduces you to the island's flora and fauna, and ends up at a therapeutic sulphuric waterfall where you can take a dip to cure what ails ya. Lunch at a Creole restaurant is included (7 hours; \$55).

Exploring on your own

There is an official **taxi** association servicing both Pointe Seraphine and La Place Carenage, with standard fares posted. You can hire a taxi to go

to Soufrière on your own, too. Many taxi drivers offer two- to three-hour tours, with a stop at the beach, for \$60. Be sure you're talking U.S. or EC dollars before agreeing on a price.

Within walking distance: The principal streets of Castries are **William Peter Boulevard** and **Bridge Street**. Don't miss a walk through town: People are very friendly, and Jeremie Street is chockablock with variety stores of the most authentic local kind, selling everything from spices to housewares. A Roman Catholic cathedral stands on **Columbus Square**, and take a gander at the enormous 400-year-old "rain" tree, also called a "no-name" tree, which grows in the square.

Beyond Government House lies **Morne Fortune**, which means "Hill of Good Luck." Actually, no one's had much luck here, certainly not the French and British soldiers who battled for **Fort Charlotte**. The fort switched between the two sides many times. You can visit the 18th-century barracks, complete with a military cemetery, a small museum, the Old Powder Magazine, and the "Four Apostles Battery," four grim muzzle-loading cannons. The view of the harbor of Castries is panoramic from this point. To reach Morne Fortune, head east on Bridge Street. Also worth a visit in Castries is a colorful market near the dock.

Beyond walking distance: St. Lucia's first national park, the 44-acre **Pigeon Island National Landmark** (☎ 758-450-0603), is ideal for picnics and nature walks, and is covered with lemongrass. It's joined to the mainland by a causeway, so you can take a taxi there. Stop by the **Captain's Cellar** pub, with seating out on the lawn just beyond the spray from the Atlantic waves. Two white-sand beaches lie on the island's west coast. Island admission is \$5.

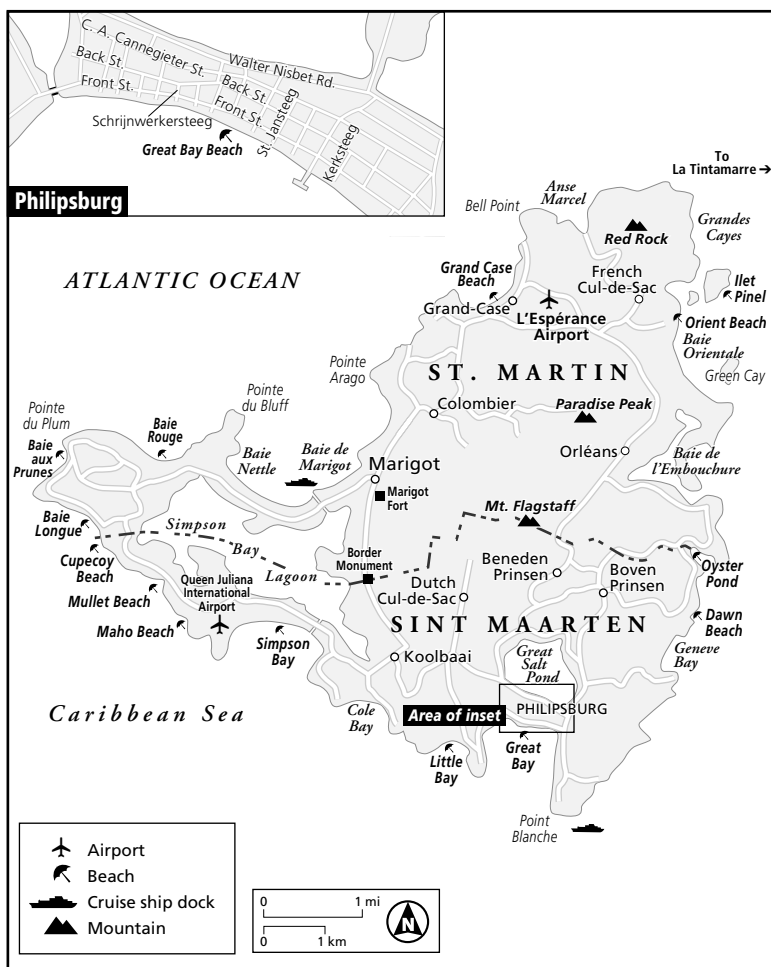
La Soufrière, a fishing port and St. Lucia's second largest settlement, is dominated by the **Pitons**. Near the town lies the famous "drive-in" volcano, **La Soufrière**, a rocky lunar landscape of bubbling mud and craters seething with fuming sulfur. You can literally drive into an old crater and walk between the sulfur springs and pools of hissing steam. Nearby are the **Diamond Mineral Baths**, dating back to 1784.

Leading beaches along the calm shores of the western coast include **Pigeon Island**, off the northern shore; **Vigie Beach**, north of Castries Harbour; **Marigot Beach**, south of Castries Harbour; and **Reduit Beach**, between Choc Bay and Pigeon Point. Just north of Soufrière is a beach connoisseur's delight, **Anse Chastanet** (☎ 758-459-7000), boasting an expanse of white sand at the foothills of lush, green mountains. This is a fantastic spot for snorkeling.

Sint Maarten & St. Martin

This 96-sq.-km (37-sq.-mile) island has two faces. It's been shared by France and the Netherlands for more than 350 years. Although the border between the two sides is virtually imperceptible — a monument along the road marks the change in administration — each side retains

Sint Maarten & St. Martin



elements of its own heritage. The French side (St. Martin), with some of the best beaches and restaurants in the Caribbean, emphasizes quiet elegance. The Dutch side (Sint Maarten) reflects Holland's anything-goes philosophy: Development is much more widespread, flashy casinos pepper the landscape, and strip malls make the larger towns look as much like Anaheim as Amsterdam. The 100 percent duty-free shopping has turned both sides of the island into a bargain-hunter's paradise.

Surprise, surprise: The official language on the Dutch side is **Dutch**, and the official language on the French side is **French**. Most people on both sides also speak **English**. The legal tender in Dutch Sint Maarten is the

Netherlands Antilles guilder, or NAf (NAf1.79 = US\$1; NAf1 = US56¢), and the official currency on the French side is the **euro** (1€ = US\$1.30; \$1 = .77€). U.S. dollars are widely accepted on both sides, and most prices are quoted in U.S. dollars, too.

Cruising into port

All cruise ships dock on the Dutch side, at **A. C. Wathey Pier**, about 1.6km (1 mile) southeast of Philipsburg. The majority of passengers are then tendered to the smaller Captain Hodge Pier in Great Bay Harbour at the center of town, but others choose to walk the distance on a newly developed boardwalk or take a taxi. The new \$40 million **Harbor Point Village** waterside complex at the port offers a host of shopping and entertainment venues housed in old West Indies-style architecture. Smaller vessels sometimes dock on the French side of the island, at **Marina Port la Royale**, adjacent to the heart of Marigot.

Scoring the best excursions

America's Cup Regatta: A sailing adventure aboard one of the yachts that competes in the America's Cup races (3 hours; \$89).

Pinel Island Snorkeling Tour: Offered on the French side, take a scenic bus ride to the French side and catch a boat to this small offshore islet for some of St. Martin's best snorkeling (3½ hours; \$39).

Exploring on your own in Sint Maarten

Taxis on both sides of the island are unmetered. Agree on a rate and currency before getting in. Dutch law requires that drivers list government-regulated fares based on two passengers. Privately owned and operated **minivans** have signs to indicate their destination, and can be hailed anywhere on the street. Fares are usually about \$1.50. **Rental cars** are a great way to see both sides of the island. Avis, Budget, and Hertz all have offices here.

Within walking distance: Directly in front of the Philipsburg town pier, on Wathey Square, the 1793-built **Courthouse** combines northern European sobriety with Caribbean brightness. East of the Courthouse, at 7 Front St. (down a little shopping alley), is the tiny **Sint Maarten Museum** (☎ 599-542-4917). Admission is free; closes 2 p.m. Saturday and all day Sunday. Historically, **Fort Amsterdam** is the Dutch side's most important colonial site. Since 1631, the fort has looked out over Great Bay from the hill west of Philipsburg. The fort was the Netherlands' first military outpost in the Caribbean. The Spanish captured it two years later, making it their most significant bastion east of Puerto Rico. The site provides grand views of the bay, but ruins of the walls and a couple of rusty cannons are all that remain of the original fort.

From the center of town, you can walk to **Great Bay Beach**; this mile-long stretch is convenient and has calm water, but it lacks the tranquility of the more remote beaches.

Gambling is also big here, with several casinos clustered along Front Street in the heart of Philipsburg. All of them open early enough to snag cruisers.

Beyond walking distance: Just west of the airport, on the west side of the island, **Maho Beach** boasts a casino, shade palms, and a popular beachside bar and grill. It's a good snorkeling spot, too. Farther west, **Mullet Beach** borders the island's golf course. Shaded by palm trees and crowded on weekends, it's popular with swimmers and snorkelers. **Dawn Beach**, on the east coast, is the best snorkeling site on the island. Rent equipment from Busby's Beach Bar, which is right on the sand.

Exploring on your own in St. Martin

For taxi info, see the preceding section, "Exploring on your own in Sint Maarten."

Within walking distance: From the 1767-built **Fort St. Louis**, Marigot's answer to Fort Amsterdam, the short climb up top affords splendid vistas. As a respite from the sun, duck into Marigot's **Museum of Saint Martin** (☎ 590-29-22-84), next to the tourism office and adjacent to the marina. Much more thorough and scholarly than its Philipsburg counterpart, this institution boasts a first-rate collection of Ciboney, Arawak, and Carib artifacts excavated from the island's Amerindian sites. Admission costs \$6.50; closed Sunday. For shoppers, an **open-air market** is in the center of town. Another busy center of activity is **Port La Royale**, the largest shopping arcade on the French side.

Petit Club is the oldest restaurant in Marigot, serving Creole and French specialties such as spicy conch stew and fresh fish.

Beyond walking distance: Top-rated beaches on the French side are **Baie Longue**, **Baie Rouge**, and **Pinel Island**. If you want a stripped-down adventure, visit the famous clothes-optional **Orient Beach**.

St. Thomas and St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands

Ever since Columbus discovered the Virgin Islands during his second voyage to the New World in 1493, they have proven irresistible to foreign powers seeking territory, at one time or another being governed by Denmark, Spain, France, England, Holland, and, since 1917, by the United States. Tourism and U.S. government programs have raised the standard of living to one of the highest in the Caribbean, and today the island is one of the busiest and most developed cruise ports in the Caribbean. On St. Thomas, **Charlotte Amalie** (pronounced ah-mahl-yah), named in 1691 in honor of the wife of Denmark's King Christian V, is the island's capital and has become the Caribbean's major shopping center and one of its busiest cruise ports — it's often downright jampacked (and not one of our favorite ports).

The most tranquil and unspoiled of the U.S. Virgin Islands is St. John, the smallest of the lot, more than half of which is preserved as the gorgeous

Virgin Islands National Park. A rocky coastline, forming crescent-shaped bays and white-sand beaches, rings the whole island, whose miles of serpentine hiking trails lead past the ruins of 18th-century Danish plantations and onto panoramic ocean views.

English is spoken on both islands, and the **U.S. dollar** is the currency. Americans get a break on shopping in the U.S. Virgin Islands, as they can bring home \$1,200 worth of merchandise without paying duty, as opposed to \$400 from most other Caribbean ports. You can also bring back more liquor from here. See Chapter 19 for more Customs information.

Cruising into port

Most cruise ships anchor at **West Indian Dock/Havensight Mall**. Located at the eastern end of Charlotte Amalie Harbor, $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from the town center, it's got its own restaurants, bookstores, banks, postal van, and lots of duty-free shops. Many people make the long, hot walk to the center of Charlotte Amalie, but it's not a scenic route in any way, so you may want to opt for one of the \$3 per-person open-air taxis. If Havensight is clogged with cruise ships, your ship will dock at the **Crown Bay Marina**, to the west of Charlotte Amalie. A taxi is your best bet — the 30-minute-plus walk into Charlotte Amalie feels longer on a hot day, and isn't terribly picturesque. A taxi ride into town from here costs about \$4.

Cruise ships cannot dock at either of St. John's piers. Instead, they moor off the coast at **Cruz Bay**, sending tenders to the National Park Service Dock, the larger of the piers. Most cruise ships docking at St. Thomas offer shore excursions to St. John's pristine interior and beaches; it's just a 45-minute ferry ride between Charlotte Amalie and Cruz Bay.

Seeking out the best shore excursions

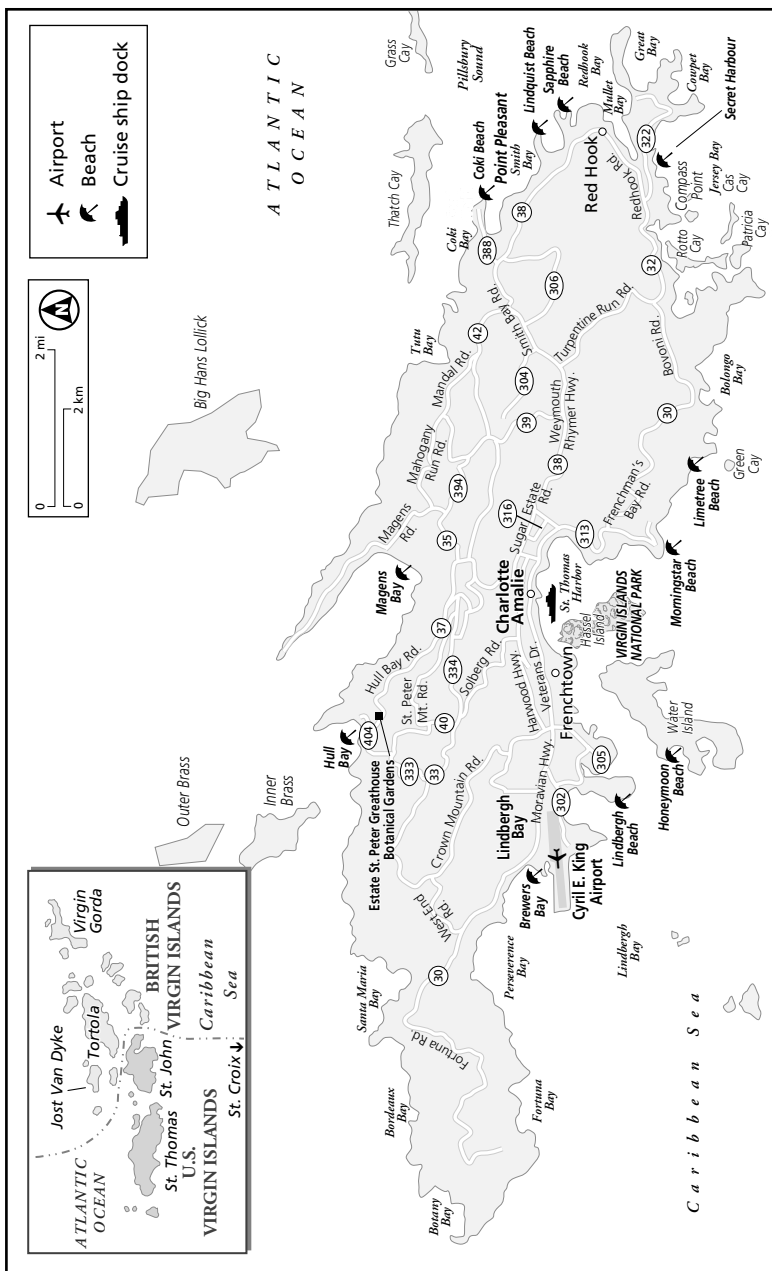
Expect to snooze through the St. Thomas sightseeing trips that most ships offer. Here are a few better bets:

Coral World and Island Drive: Coral World Underwater Observatory and Marine Park is St. Thomas's top attraction (3 hours; \$39–\$42).

Kayaking the Marine Sanctuary: Kayak from the mouth of the marine sanctuary at Holmberg's Marina and spend nearly an hour paddling among the mangroves while a naturalist explains the mangrove and lagoon ecosystem. Includes a free half-hour to snorkel or walk along the coral beach at Bovoni Point ($3\frac{1}{2}$ hours; \$72–\$79).

Golfing at Mahogany Run: Designed by Tom and George Fazio, Mahogany Run is one of the most beautiful courses in the West Indies. This 18-hole, par-70 course rises and drops like a roller coaster on its journey to the sea. You can also make arrangements for play on your own (☎ **800-253-7103, ext. 1**, or 340-777-6250, ext. 1). Greens fees are \$130, including cart; the 20- to 30-minute taxi ride costs you about \$10 each way (5 hours; \$170).

St. Thomas



St. John Eco-Hike: Take the ferry to St. John for a walkabout through the Virgin Islands National Park. The Lind Point Trail ascends about 250 feet to the Lind Point Overlook for views of St. John, St. Thomas, and the surrounding islands. An expert guide discusses the park's ecosystem and St. John's cultural history while you walk to Honeymoon Beach for a little swimming (4 hours; \$64).

Water Island Bike Trip and Beach Adventure: After a ferry ride to Water Island, a five-minute bus ride takes you to the island's highest point, from which you get a nice downhill ride. Your guide will point out various historic sites and wildlife en route to Honeymoon Beach (3½ hours; \$79).

Exploring on your own in St. Thomas

Taxis are the chief means of transport here. They're unmetered, but a guide of point-to-point fares around the island is included in most tourist magazines. Less formal, privately owned **taxi vans** make unscheduled stops along major traffic arteries, charging less than a dollar for most rides.

Within walking distance: In days of yore, seafarers from all over the globe flocked to the old Danish town of Charlotte Amalie, including pirates and, during the Civil War, Confederate sailors. The main streets (called *Gades* here in honor of their Danish heritage) are a veritable shopping mall, especially close to the waterfront. Stray farther landward and you can find pockets of 19th-century houses and the truly charming, cozy, brick-and-stone **St. Thomas Synagogue**, built in 1833 by Sephardic Jews. There's a great view from here as well. It's located high on steep, sloping Crystal Gade.

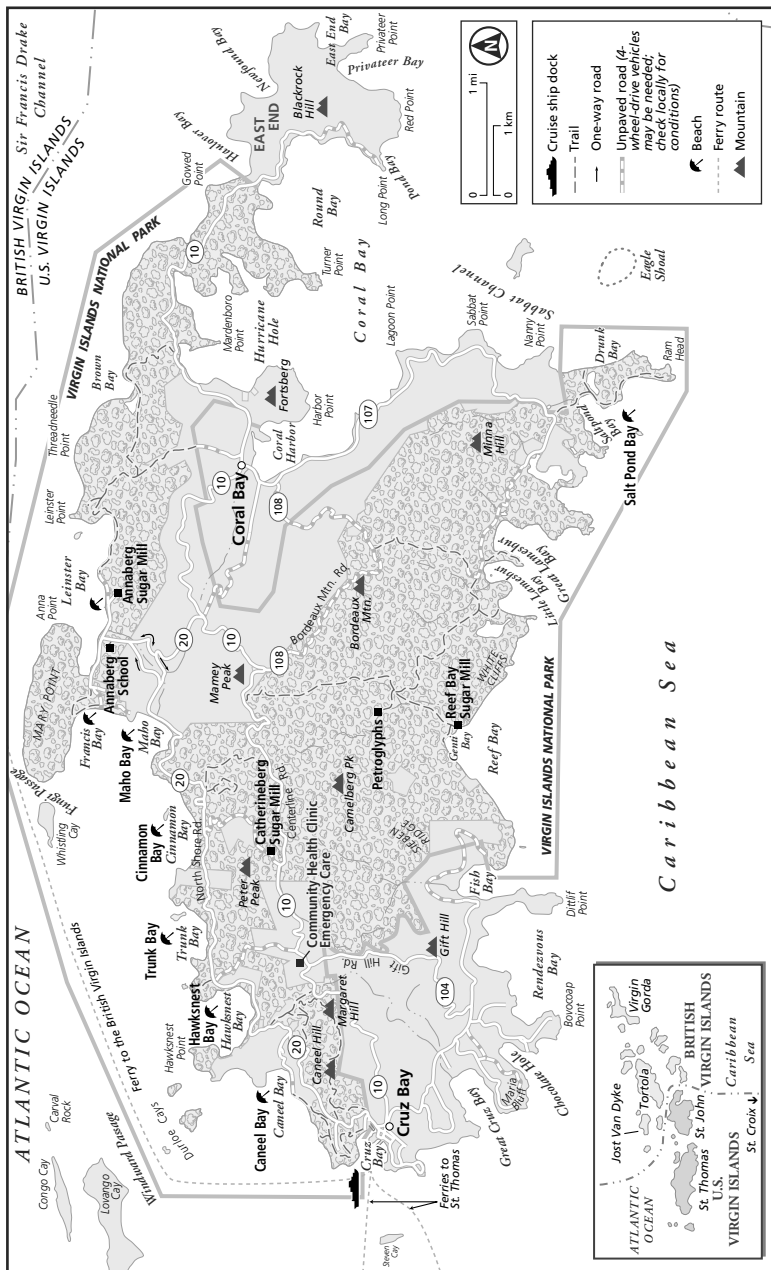
Dating from 1672, **Fort Christian**, 32 Raadets Gade, rises from the harbor to dominate the center of town. Named after the Danish king Christian V, the structure has been everything from a governor's residence to a jail. Many pirates were hanged in its courtyard.

Seven Arches Museum, on Government Hill (☎ 340-774-9295), is a two-century-old Danish house completely restored to its original condition and furnished with antiques. You can walk through the yellow ballast arches and visit the great room with its view of the busy harbor. Admission is \$5.

The **Paradise Point Tramway** (☎ 340-774-9809) affords visitors a dramatic view of Charlotte Amalie Harbor at a peak height of 697 feet. The tramways transport customers from the Havensight area to Paradise Point, where riders disembark to visit shops and a popular restaurant and bar. The cost is \$16 round-trip.

Shopping is a main attraction in St. Thomas, and **Main Street** is the main shopping street. To the north is the fully stocked **Back Street**. The **Waterfront Highway** also sports stores, and you can always check out the side streets, alleys, and walkways between these principal streets.

St. John



Dating back to 1672 and dominating the center of town, **Fort Christian** was named after the Danish monarch Christian V and has served as everything from a governor's residence to a prison. Some of the cells have become part of the **Virgin Islands Museum**. Historical artifacts are on display at the small facility.

Beyond walking distance: The lush **St. Peter Greathouse Estate and Gardens**, at the corner of St. Peter Mountain Road (Rte. 40) and Barrett Hill Road (☎ 340-774-4999), ornaments 11 acres on the volcanic peaks of the island's northern rim. It's the creation of Howard Lawson DeWolfe, a *Mayflower* descendant who, with his wife, Sylvie, bought the estate in 1987 and set about transforming it into a tropical paradise. It's filled with some 200 varieties of plants and trees, including an umbrella plant from Madagascar. There's also a rain forest, an orchid jungle, waterfalls, and reflecting ponds. From a panoramic deck you can see some 20 of the Virgin Islands. The house itself is worth a visit, its interior filled with local art. Admission is \$10.

St. Thomas has some good beaches, all of which are easily reached by taxi. Arrange for your driver to return and pick you up at a designated time. If you're going to St. John, you may want to do your beaching there.

St. Thomas's beaches are open to the public, but some charge a fee. The most well known (and most popular for windsurfing) is **Sapphire Beach** on the east end of the island. Rent snorkeling gear or lounge chairs, or stretch out on its white-coral sand and take in the sun and the spectacular views of the bay. Other worthwhile beaches are **Magens Bay**, **Coki Beach** (at the Marine Park), and the **Morningstar**, just 2 miles from port.



If you check out the beaches on St. Thomas, be sure to protect your belongings — pickpockets and thieves have been known to strike. Also, to ensure that you don't miss the boat, arrange for a cab to pick you up at a specific time.

Exploring on your own in St. John

A tiny gem, lush St. John lies about 3 miles east of St. Thomas across Pillsbury Sound. It's the smallest and least populated of the U.S. Virgins, and since 1956, more than half of St. John's land mass, as well as its shoreline waters, have been set aside as the Virgin Islands National Park, and today the island leads the Caribbean in eco- (or "sustainable") tourism. Miles of winding hiking trails lead to panoramic views and the ruins of 18th-century Danish plantations. Because St. John is easy to reach from St. Thomas, and the beaches are spectacular, many cruise ship passengers spend their entire stay there.

Within walking distance: There are shopping, bars, and restaurants right by the docks. Otherwise, the most popular way to get around St. John is by **surrey-style taxi**. Typical fares from Cruz Bay are \$5.50 to Trunk Bay, \$7 to Cinnamon Bay, and \$11 to Maho Bay. Taxis wait at the pier. You can also rent open-sided **jeeps**. Avis and Hertz both have

offices here. Just remember to drive on the left, even though steering wheels are on the left, too. Go figure.

Beyond walking distance: At the **Virgin Islands National Park**, head to the **visitor center** (☎ 340-776-6201) right on the dock at St. Cruz, where you can view some exhibits and find out more about what you can see and do in the park. You can explore the park on the more than 20 miles of biking trails; rent your own car, Jeep, or Mini-Moke; or hike. The starting points of some trails are within walking distance while others can be reached by taxi for about \$5 to \$20. Within the park, try to see the **Annaberg Ruins**, Leinster Bay Road, where the Danes founded thriving plantations and a sugar mill in 1718. They're located off North Shore Road, east of Trunk Bay on the north shore.

To beach it, **Trunk Bay** is your best bet for the local beach experience, especially for snorkelers, who can rent gear and explore the underwater trail near the shore. Trunk Bay has amenities, such as showers, a snack shop, and lifeguards, but it also has crowds. **Hawksnest Beach**, **Cinnamon Bay**, **Honeymoon Beach**, **Maho Bay**, and **Salt Pond Bay** are all good beach choices.

Enjoying the Cruise Lines' Private Islands

Several cruise lines have spent millions to create their own fantasy islands (or at least beaches), giving passengers a beach day without the hassle of having to find the place. You normally get a whole day to bake on the beach, swim, snorkel, play beach games, go water-skiing or parasailing, or take advantage of whatever fancy facilities the cruise line has built. Children's activities may involve playground facilities, beach walks, and games. The islands typically have several beaches (the farthest off usually being the quietest), several bars, live music, and at least a few places to get lunch, usually of the barbecue variety.



Among the islands, only Disney's has docking facilities allowing passengers to just walk out onto the island. At all the others, you must ride a tender back and forth from the ship. Make sure to alert the crew if you require special assistance or a little "tender" loving care.

✔ **Costa Cruises:** Passengers on Costa's eastern Caribbean itineraries spend a day at **Catalina Island**, off the coast of the Dominican Republic, enjoying a long beach fringed by palm trees; opportunities for volleyball, beach Olympics, and snorkeling (plus jet skiing and banana-boat rides for a fee); and massages on the beach. Music and barbecue round out the day, and there's also a strip of shops hawking jewelry, beachwear, and other souvenirs.



✔ **Disney Cruise Line:** The 1,000-acre, 3×2-mile **Castaway Cay** (pronounced *key*) is a port of call on all Disney cruises, and is definitely the most elaborate of the private islands. Guests can swim and snorkel, rent bikes and boats, get their hair braided, shop, send

postcards, go parasailing, have a massage, take a nature hike, or just lounge in a hammock or on the beach, snarfing barbecue. Families can head to their own beach, lined with lounge chairs and pastel-colored umbrellas, where they can swim, explore a 12-acre snorkeling course, climb around on the offshore water-play structures, or rent a kayak, paddle boat, banana boat, sailboat, or other beach equipment. Teens have a beach of their own, as do adults (on the far end of the island), and kids 3 to 12 can play at a supervised children's activity center whose highlight is an excavation site where kids can dig till they find something, then make plaster molds of whatever it might be.

- ✓ **Holland America:** Located on the Bahamian island of San Salvador, **Half Moon Cay** is a port of call on most of the line's Caribbean and Panama Canal cruises. Though the island is large, spreading out over 2,500 acres, Holland America has developed only 45 acres of it, maintaining the rest as a wild-bird reserve on behalf of the Bahamian National Trust. You can explore a network of hiking trails while keeping an eye out for all sorts of birds, including terns, shearwaters, and Bahamian pintails. Families can appreciate the new water park at one end of the beach, as well as the offshore play areas. Massages are available in huts along the beach, and big-spenders can also get air-conditioned beachfront cabanas with an open bar and butler service. La di da. Away from the main beach area, you can spend extra to go horseback riding, swim around with 26 resident stingrays, or go windsurfing, snorkeling, kayaking, scuba diving, deep-sea fishing, parasailing, sailboarding, or aqua-cycling.
- ✓ **Norwegian Cruise Line:** Norwegian bought the small, uninhabited Bahamian island of **Great Stirrup Cay** in 1977, making it the oldest of the private cruise line islands. Passengers can ride paddle boats, sail Sunfish, go snorkeling or parasailing, hop on a banana boat, join a game of volleyball, get a massage at one of the beachside stations, or do nothing more than sunbathe all day long. For kids, organized activities include volleyball tournaments and sandcastle building.
- ✓ **Princess Cruises:** Princess set up Princess Cays in 1992 on the southwest coast of Eleuthera in The Bahamas, and today makes it a stop on most eastern and western Caribbean itineraries. The half-mile of shoreline gives passengers room to swim, snorkel, and make use of Princess's fleet of Hobie Cats, Sunfish, banana boats, kayaks, and paddle-wheelers (bookable aboard ship before your visit). There's also live music, a dance area, and a beach barbecue, plus a strip of several dozen tree-shaded hammocks at the far end of the beach. For kids, there's a supervised play area with a sandbox and a pirate ship-themed playground.
- ✓ **Royal Caribbean (and Celebrity):** Sister lines Royal Caribbean and Celebrity have two different private spots, which often figure into their itineraries. **CocoCay** (also known as Little Stirrup Cay) is a small, 140-acre dot in The Bahamas' Berry Islands. You can find lots

of beach, hammocks, food, drink, and watersports, plus such activities as limbo contests, water-balloon tosses, relay races, and volleyball tournaments. Kids get an aqua park that includes a floating trampoline, water slides, and a sunken airplane and schooner for snorkelers. For something quieter there's Wanderer's Beach, with calm surf and ultrasoft sand. The line's other beach stop is **Labadee**, an isolated, very private 270-acre peninsula along Haiti's north coast. Five beaches are spread around the peninsula, and are progressively less crowded the farther you walk from the dock. In the Columbus Cove area, a children's aqua park called Arawak Cay is full of floating trampolines, inflatable iceberg-shaped slides, and water seesaws. Kayaking and parasailing are offered from a dock nearby. A big plus at Labadee is the authentic and high-quality music and dance. On both Labadee and CocoCay, organized children's activities include beach parties, volleyball, seashell collecting, and sand-castle building.