

Choosing the Perfect Island: The Best of the Caribbean

In the Caribbean, you can hike through national parks and scuba dive along underwater mountains. But perhaps your idea of the perfect island vacation is to plunk yourself down on the sands with a frosted drink in hand. Whether you want a veranda with a view of the sea or a plantation house set in a field of sugar cane, this chapter will help you choose the vacation that best suits your needs.

For a thumbnail portrait of each island, see “The Islands in Brief,” in chapter 2.

1 The Best Beaches

Good beaches with soul-warming sun, crystal-clear waters, and fragrant sea air can be found on virtually every island of the Caribbean, with the possible exceptions of Saba (which has rocky shores) and Dominica (where the few beaches have dramatically black sands that absorb the hot sun).

- **Shoal Bay** (Anguilla): This luscious stretch of silvery sand helped put Anguilla on the world-tourism map. Snorkelers are drawn to the schools of iridescent fish that dart among the coral gardens offshore. You can take the trail walk from Old Ta to little-known Katouche Beach, which offers perfect snorkeling and is also a prime site for a beach picnic under shade trees. See chapter 3.
- **The Beaches of Antigua:** Legend has it that there is a beach here for every day of the year, though we haven't bothered to confirm that by counting. Antiguan claim, with justifiable pride, that their two best beaches are Dickenson Bay, in the northwest corner of the island, and Half Moon Bay, which stretches for a white-sandy mile along the eastern coast. Most major hotels open directly onto a good beach, so chances are good yours will be built on or near a strip of white sand. See chapter 4.
- **Palm Beach** (Aruba): This superb white-sand beach put Aruba on the tourist map. Several publications, including *Condé Nast Traveler*, have hailed it as one of the 12 best beaches in the world. It's likely to be crowded in winter, but for swimming, sailing, or fishing, it's idyllic. See chapter 5.
- **The Gold Coast** (Barbados): Some of the finest beaches in the Caribbean lie along the so-called Gold Coast of Barbados, site of some of the swankiest deluxe hotels in the Northern Hemisphere. Our favorites include Paynes Bay, Brandon's Beach, Paradise Beach, and Brighton Beach, all open to the public. See chapter 6.
- **Cane Garden Bay** (Tortola, British Virgin Islands): One of the Caribbean's most spectacular stretches, Cane Garden Bay has 2km (1¼ miles) of white

The Perfect Caribbean Vacation, Then and Now

In 1961, Frommer's published *Miami and the Caribbean on 10 Dollars a Day*. Although prices have obviously changed since then, the premise of tropical vacation is still the same: "to lie on a sunlit beach reading a paperback novel; to hunt out [local] centers of entertainment and culture; to be free; to experience the life of other peoples."

sand and is a jogger's favorite. It's a much better choice than more obvious (and more crowded) Magens Bay beach on neighboring St. Thomas. See chapter 8.

- **Seven Mile Beach** (Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands): It's really about 9km (5½ miles) long, but who's counting? Lined with condos and plush resorts, this beach is known for its array of watersports and its translucent aquamarine waters. Australian pines dot the background, and the average winter temperature of the water is a perfect 80°F (27°C). See chapter 9.
- **The Beaches of the Dominican Republic:** There are two great options here: the beaches of resort-riddled Punta Cana at the easternmost tip of the island, or those at Playa Dorada along the northern coast, which fronts the Atlantic. Punta Cana is a 30km (20-mile) strip of oyster-white sands set against a backdrop of palm trees, and Playa Dorada is filled with beaches of white or beige sands. See chapter 12.
- **Grand Anse Beach** (Grenada): This 3km (2-mile) beach is reason enough to go to Grenada. Although the island has some 45 beaches, most with white sand, this is the fabled one, and rightly so. There's enough space and so few visitors that you'll probably find a spot just for yourself. The sugary sands of Grand Anse extend into deep waters far offshore. Most of the island's best hotels are within walking distance of this beach strip. See chapter 13.
- **Seven Mile Beach** (Negril, Jamaica): In the northwestern section of the island, this beach stretches for 11km (6¾ miles) along the sea, and is backed by some of the most hedonistic resorts in the Caribbean. Not for the conservative, the beach also contains some nudist sections along with bare-all Booby Cay offshore. See chapter 15.
- **Diamond Beach** (Martinique): This bright, white-sandy beach stretches for about 10km (6¼ miles), much of it developed. It faces a rocky offshore island, Diamond Rock, which has uninhabited shores. See chapter 16.
- **Luquillo Beach** (Puerto Rico): This crescent-shaped public beach, about 50km (30 miles) east of San Juan, is the local favorite. Much photographed because of its white sands and coconut palms, it also has tent sites and picnic facilities. The often-fierce waters of the Atlantic are subdued by the coral reefs protecting the crystal-clear lagoon. See chapter 17.
- **St-Jean Beach** (St. Barthélemy): A somewhat narrow, golden sandy beach, St-Jean is the gem of the island, reminiscent of the French Riviera (though you're supposed to keep your top on). Reefs protect the beach, making it ideal for swimming. See chapter 19.
- **The Beaches of St. Maarten/St. Martin:** Take your pick. This island, divided about equally between France

The Caribbean Islands





and the Netherlands, has 39 white-sandy beaches. Our favorites include Dawn Beach, Mullet Bay Beach, Maho Bay Beach, and Great Bay Beach on the Dutch side. Orient Beach is another standout—not because of its sands but because of the nudists. See chapter 23.

- **Canouan** (The Grenadines): Most of the other beaches recommended in this section have been discovered and may be crowded in winter. But if you're looking for an idyllic, secluded stretch of perfect white sand, head for the remote and tiny island of Canouan, one of the pearls of The Grenadines, a string of islands lying south of its parent, St. Vincent. You'll have the beaches and the crystal-clear waters to yourself, even in winter. See chapter 24.
- **The Beaches of Tobago:** For your Robinson Crusoe holiday in the southern Caribbean, head to the little island of Tobago. Even Trinidadians fly over here on weekends to enjoy the beach life. It doesn't get any better than a long coral beach called Pigeon Point on the northwestern coast. Other good

beaches on Tobago include Back Bay (site of an old coconut plantation) and Man-O-War Bay, known for its beautiful natural harbor and long stretch of sand. See chapter 25.

- **Grace Bay Beach** (Providenciales, Turks and Caicos Islands): These 20km (12 miles) of pale sands are the pride of Provo; *Condé Nast Traveler* has called this one of the world's best beaches. It's such a spectacular setting that increasing numbers of resorts, including Club Med, have sprung up along the shore. A couple of miles out from the northern shore, the beach is fringed by a reef with fabulous snorkeling. Back on land, there are plenty of places where you can rent water-sports equipment. See chapter 26.
- **Trunk Bay** (St. John): Protected by the U.S. National Park Service, this beach is one of the Caribbean's most popular. A favorite with cruise-ship passengers, it's known for its underwater snorkeling trail, where markers guide you along the reef just off the white sands; you're sure to see a gorgeous rainbow of tropical fish. See chapter 27.

2 The Best Snorkeling

The Virgin Islands offer some particularly outstanding sites, but there are many other great places for snorkeling in the Caribbean.

- **Antigua:** This is a snorkeler's dream. Most of its lovely beaches open onto clear, calm waters populated by rainbow-hued tropical fish. The marine life offshore is particularly dense, including gentle manta rays and colorful sea anemones. The rich types of different elk and brain coral make snorkeling particularly rewarding. See chapter 4.
- **Bonaire Marine Park** (Bonaire): All the attributes that make Bonaire a world-class diving destination apply to

its snorkeling, too. Snorkelers can wade from the shores off their hotels to the reefs and view an array of coral and a range of colorful fish. In particular, the reefs just off Klein Bonaire and Washington-Slagbaai National Park receive rave reviews. See chapter 7.

- **Stingray City** (Grand Cayman): Stingray City is an easy 4m (13-ft.) diving site that can also be seen while snorkeling. It's an extraordinary experience to meet the dozens of tame, gentle stingrays that glide around you in the warm, crystal-clear waters. See chapter 9.
- **Curaçao Underwater Marine Park** (Curaçao): In contrast to Curaçao's

arid terrain, the marine life that rings the island is rich and spectacular. The best-known snorkeling sites, in the Curaçao Underwater Marine Park, stretch for 20km (12 miles) along Curaçao's southern coastline, and there are many other highly desirable sites as well. Sunken ships, gardens of hard and soft coral, and millions of fish are a snorkeler's treat. See chapter 10.

- **St. Martin:** The best snorkeling on the island lies on the French side, where the government religiously protects the calm waters, which are populated with schools of brilliantly colored fish. Find a tiny cove and explore the shallow reefs along its shores, especially in the northeastern underwater nature reserve. See chapter 23.
- **The Grenadines:** Every island offers great snorkeling possibilities right off magnificent white-sandy beaches. In most places you'll have the waters to yourself. A reef stretching for 1.5km (1 mile) along the island of Canouan invites snorkelers, and the waters are filled with beautiful brain coral and rainbow-hued fish. The snorkeling is also good at Palm Island and Petit St. Vincent. See chapter 24.
- **Tobago:** The shallow, sun-dappled waters off the coastline facing Venezuela boast enormous colonies of marine life. Buccoo Reef on Tobago is especially noteworthy, and many local entrepreneurs offer snorkeling cruises. See chapter 25.
- **Provo** (Turks and Caicos): Although this island is known primarily as one of the world's best dive sites, it also offers a number of snorkeling possibilities. The government has established snorkel trails at Smith's Reef and Bight Reef, right off of Provo's spectacular Grace Bay Beach. These reefs are right off the shoreline, and they provide easy access into the fragile but stunningly beautiful world of

coral gardens, the most dramatic in the vast area immediately south of The Bahamas. See chapter 26.

- **Coki Point Beach** (St. Thomas): On the north shore of St. Thomas, this beach offers excellent snorkeling, especially around the coral ledges near Coral World's underwater tower, a favorite with cruise-ship passengers. See chapter 27.
- **Buck Island** (St. Croix): More than 250 species of fish, as well as a variety of sponges, corals, and crustaceans, have been found at this 340-hectare (840-acre) island and reef system, 3km (2 miles) off St. Croix's north shore. The reef is strictly protected by the National Park Service. See chapter 27.
- **Cane Bay** (St. Croix): One of the best diving and snorkeling sites on St. Croix is off this breezy north-shore beach. On a clear day, you can swim out 140m (450 ft.) and see the Cane Bay Wall that drops off dramatically to deep waters below. Multicolored fish and elkhorn and brain coral abound. See chapter 27.
- **Trunk Bay** (St. John): Trunk Bay's self-guided 205m-long (670-ft.) trail has large underwater signs that identify species of coral and other items of interest. The beach offers showers, changing rooms, equipment rentals, and a lifeguard. See chapter 27.
- **Leinster Bay** (St. John): With easy access from land and sea, Leinster Bay is filled with calm, clear, and uncrowded waters with an abundance of sea life. See chapter 27.
- **Haulover Bay** (St. John): A favorite with locals, this small bay is rougher than Leinster and is often deserted. The snorkeling is dramatic, with ledges, walls, nooks, and sandy areas set close together. At this spot, only about 180m (600 ft.) of land separates the Atlantic Ocean from the Caribbean Sea. See chapter 27.

3 The Best Diving

All the major islands offer diving trips, lessons, and equipment, but here are the top picks.

- **Bonaire:** The highly accessible reefs that surround Bonaire have never suffered from poaching or pollution, and the island's environmentally conscious diving industry ensures they never will. Created from volcanic eruptions, the island is an underwater mountain, with fringe reefs right off the beach of every hotel on any part of the island. See chapter 7.
- **Virgin Gorda:** Many divers plan their entire vacations around exploring the famed wreck of the HMS *Rhone*, off Salt Island. This royal mail steamer, which went down in 1867, is the most celebrated diving site in the Caribbean. See chapter 8.
- **Grand Cayman:** This is a world-class diving destination. There are 34 dive operators on Grand Cayman (with five more on Little Cayman, plus three on Cayman Brac). A full range of professional diving services is available, including equipment sales, rentals, and repairs; instruction at all levels; underwater photography; and video schools. See chapter 9.
- **Saba:** Islanders can't brag about its beaches, but Saba is blessed with some of the Caribbean's richest marine life. It's one of the premier diving locations in the Caribbean, with 38 official diving sites. The unusual setting includes underwater lava flows, black sand, large strands of black coral, millions of fish, and

underwater mountaintops submerged under 27m (90 ft.) of water. See chapter 18.

- **Turks and Caicos Islands:** These islands offer a rich assortment of relatively unexplored underwater sites, including sea lanes where boaters and divers often spot whales from January to March. A collection of unusual underwater wrecks includes the HMS *Endymion*, which sank during a storm in 1790. Miles of reefs house myriad kinds of colorful marine life. Right off Grand Turk, experienced divers love the many miles of "drop-off" diving, where the sea walls plunge into the uncharted depths of blue holes more than 2,100m (6,900 ft.) below sea level. As you descend you'll see colonies of black coral, rare forms of anemone, purple sponges, stunning gorgonian, endless forms of coral, and thousands of fish. See chapter 26.
- **St. Croix:** Increasingly known as a top diving destination, St. Croix hasn't yet overtaken Grand Cayman, but has a lot going for it. Beach dives, reef dives, wreck dives, nighttime dives, wall dives—they're all here. The highlight is the underwater trails of the national park at Buck Island, off St. Croix's mainland. Other desirable sites include the drop-offs and coral canyons at Cane Bay and Salt River. Davis Bay is the location of the 3,600m-deep (12,000-ft.) Puerto Rico Trench, the fifth-deepest body of water on earth. See chapter 27.

4 The Best Sailing

Virtually every large-scale hotel in the Caribbean provides small sailboats (most often Sunfish, Sailfish, and small, one-masted catamarans) for its guests. If

you're looking for larger craft, the almost-ideal sailing conditions in the Virgin Islands and The Grenadines come instantly to mind. These two regions

offer many options for dropping anchor at secluded coves surrounded by relatively calm waters. Both areas are spectacular, but whereas the Virgin Islands offer more dramatic, mountainous terrain, The Grenadines offer insights into island cultures little touched by the modern world.

Other places to sail in the Caribbean include Antigua, Barbados, St. Martin, and the French-speaking islands. But if you plan on doing a lot of sailing, know that the strongest currents and biggest waves are usually on the northern and eastern sides of most islands—the Atlantic (as opposed to the Caribbean) side.

- **The Grenadines:** Boating is a way of life in The Grenadines, partly because access to many of the tiny remote islands is difficult or impossible by airplane. One of the most prominent local charter agents is **Nicholson Yacht Charters** (☎ 800/662-6066 in the U.S.), headquartered in nearby St. Vincent. On Bequia, Mustique, Petit St. Vincent, and Union Island, all the hotels can put you in touch with local entrepreneurs who rent sailing craft. See chapter 24 for more details.
- **The Virgin Islands:** Perhaps because of their well-developed marina facilities (and those of the nearby United States), the Virgin Islands receive the lion's share of devoted yachties. The reigning capital for sailing is Tortola, the largest island of the British

Virgins. On-site are about 300 well-maintained sailing craft available for bareboat rentals and perhaps 100 charter yachts.

The largest of the Caribbean's yacht chartering services is **The Moorings** (☎ 888/535-7289 in the U.S. and Canada, or 284/494-2226 in the British Virgin Islands). This yachting charter center is described more fully in chapter 8, as are the other outfits in this paragraph. On the island of Virgin Gorda, in the British Virgin Islands, the best bet for both boat rentals and accommodations, as well as for a range of instruction, is the **Bitter End Yacht Club** (☎ 800/872-2392 in the U.S., or 284/494-2746).

Some of the biggest charter business in the Caribbean is conducted on St. Thomas, especially at **American Yacht Harbor**, Red Hook (☎ 340/775-6454), which offers bareboat and fully crewed charters. Other reliable rental agents include **Charteryacht League**, at Flagship (☎ 800/524-2061 in the U.S., or 340/774-3944). The U.S. Virgin Islands are covered in chapter 27.

On St. Croix, boating is less essential to the local economy than it is on St. Thomas or in the British Virgins, so if you're taking a Virgin Islands sailing trip, plan accordingly.

5 The Best Golf Courses

Some of the world's most famous golf architects, including Robert Trent Jones (both Jr. and Sr.), Pete Dye, and Gary Player, have designed challenging courses in the Caribbean.

- **Tierra del Sol Golf Course** (Aruba; ☎ 297/58-67800): Robert Trent Jones, Jr., has designed an 18-hole, par-71, 6,811-yard course that is one of the grandest in the southern

Caribbean. On the northwest coast of this arid, cactus-studded island, the course takes in Aruba's indigenous flora, including the divi-divi tree. See p. 120.

- **Teeth of the Dog** and **The Links**, both at Casa de Campo (Dominican Republic; ☎ 809/523-3333, ext. 3187): Teeth of the Dog is one of designer Pete Dye's masterpieces.

Seven holes are set adjacent to the sea, whereas the other 11 are confoundingly labyrinthine. The resort also has a second golf course, The Links, which some claim is even more difficult. See p. 274.

- **Golf de St-François** (Guadeloupe; ☎ 590/88-41-87): Six of its 18 holes are ringed with water traps, the winds are devilishly unpredictable, and the par is a sweat-inducing 71. This fearsome course displays the wit and skill of its designer, Robert Trent Jones, Sr. Most of the staff is multilingual, and because the course is owned by the local municipality, it's a lot less snobby than you might expect. See p. 346.
- **The Tryall Club** (Montego Bay, Jamaica; ☎ 876/956-5660): This is the finest golf course on an island known for its tricky breezes. The site occupied by The Tryall Club was once the home of one of Jamaica's best-known sugar plantations, the only remnant of which is a ruined waterwheel. The promoters of Johnnie Walker Scotch, who know a lot about golfing, use this place for their most prestigious competition. In winter, the course is usually open only to guests of The Tryall Club. See p. 375.
- **Cinnamon Hill Ocean Course** (Rose Hall, Jamaica; ☎ 866/831-1313): This is one of the top five courses in the world, even though it faces tough competition in Montego Bay. The signature hole is 8, which doglegs onto a promontory and a green that thrusts about 180m (600 ft.) into the sea. The back nine, however, are the most scenic and most challenging, rising into steep slopes and deep ravines on Mount Zion. See p. 375.
- **Four Seasons Resort Nevis** (Nevis; ☎ 869/469-1111): We consider this our personal favorite in all of the Caribbean, and so do readers of *Caribbean Travel & Life*. It was carved out of a coconut plantation and tropical rainforest in the 1980s, and its undulating beauty is virtually unequalled. Designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr., the course begins at sea level, rises to a point midway up the slopes of Mount Nevis, and then slants gracefully back down near the beachfront clubhouse. Electric carts carry golfers through a labyrinth of well-groomed paths, some of which skirt steep ravines. See p. 555.

6 The Best Tennis Facilities

- **Curtain Bluff** (Antigua; ☎ 888/289-9898 in the U.S., or 268/462-8400): Small, select, and carefully run by people who love tennis, this is also the annual site of a well-known spring tournament. The courts are set in a low-lying valley. See p. 78.
- **Casa de Campo** (Dominican Republic; ☎ 800/877-3643 or 809/523-3333): The facilities here include 13 clay courts (10 are lit, and 2 are ringed with stadium seating), 4 all-weather Laykold courts, a resident pro, ball machines, and tennis pros who are usually available to play with guests. During midwinter, residents and clients of Casa de Campo have first crack at court times. See p. 273.
- **Half Moon Rose Hall** (Montego Bay, Jamaica; ☎ 876/953-2211): This resort sprawls over hundreds of acres, with about a dozen tennis courts and at least four squash and/or racquetball courts. Jamaica has a strong, British-based affinity for tennis, and Half Moon keeps the tradition alive. See p. 364.
- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Puerto Rico; ☎ 800/468-5228 or 787/863-1000): Facilities at

this megaresort include 7 Har-Tru tennis courts, a resident pro, and a clubhouse with its own bar. If you're looking for a partner, the hotel will find one for you. Only guests of the hotel can use the courts, some of which are illuminated for night play. See p. 496.

- **Hyatt Dorado Beach Resort & Country Club** (Puerto Rico; ☎ 787/796-1234): This beachfront resort offers five all-weather tennis courts, some lit, some ringed with stadium seats; all are administered by a tennis pro who gives lessons. If you want pointers on improving your serve or strokes, someone will be on hand to videotape you. This property is closing as we go to print, but the tennis courts will remain open. For details, phone ☎ 787/796-1234.

- **Wyndham Sugar Bay Beach Resort & Spa** (St. Thomas; ☎ 800/996-3426 in the U.S., or 340/777-7100): The resort offers the first stadium tennis court in the U.S. Virgin Islands, with a capacity of 220 spectators. In addition, it has four Laykold courts, each of which is lit for night play. There's an on-site pro shop, and lessons are available. See p. 703.

- **The Buccaneer** (St. Croix; ☎ 800/255-3881 in the U.S., or 340/773-2100): Hailed as having the best tennis facilities in the Virgin Islands, this resort hosts several tournaments every year. There are eight all-weather Laykold courts, two of which are illuminated at night; there's also a pro shop. Nonguests can play here for a fee. See p. 726.

7 The Best Places to Honeymoon

More and more couples are exchanging their vows in the Caribbean. Many resorts will arrange everything from the preacher to the flowers, so we've included in the following list some outfits that provide wedding services. For more information about the various options and the legal requirements for marriages on some of the more popular Caribbean islands, see chapter 2.

- **Cap Juluca** (Anguilla; ☎ 888/858-5822 in the U.S., or 264/497-6779): This resort boasts a unique postmodern design, multimillion-dollar decor, and a thrillingly beautiful beach. The result resembles a Saharan Casbah with domed villas that seem to float against the scrubland and azure sky. It's an extremely stylish setting for romance. More than any other resort on Anguilla, Cap Juluca affords privacy with its 72 hectares (180 acres). In a secluded villa, honeymooners enjoy private pools and huge tubs for two. You can join other guests for

meals and/or retreat into total seclusion. See p. 61.

- **St. James's Club** (Antigua; ☎ 800/858-4618 in the U.S., or 268/460-5000): There are enough diversions at this very posh, British-style resort to keep a honeymooning couple up and about for weeks. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are included, along with unlimited drinks. Among the perks is a private, candlelit dinner for two in a romantic setting. Honeymooners are greeted with a bottle of champagne and freshly cut bougainvillea in their rooms, which can be private villas, suites, or, for complete isolation, a hillside home. Unlike Cap Juluca, which promotes seclusion, this is for honeymooners who prefer an active lifestyle, gambling at the casino, taking in the beach, or enjoying the widest array of dining and drinking options of any hotel on the island. See p. 80.

- **Biras Creek Estate** (Virgin Gorda, B.V.I.; ☎ **800/223-1108** in the U.S., or 310/440-4225): If you're eager to escape your in-laws and bridesmaids after a wedding ceremony, this is the place. It's a quintessential mariner's hideaway that can be reached only via a several-mile boat ride across the open sea. Perched on a narrow promontory jutting into the Caribbean, it's an intensely private retreat set on 60 hectares (150 acres) with a crisscrossing network of signposted nature trails. Spacious, open-air, walled showers are provided in each bathroom. Honeymooners come here not to be pampered, but to be left alone to do their thing. Entertainment and dancing enliven some evenings, but for the most part you'll enjoy utter tranquility. Its king-size beds are the best on the island. Don't come here for a lot of activities. See p. 192.
- **Peter Island Resort** (Peter Island, B.V.I.; ☎ **800/346-4451** or 284/495-2000): Romantics appreciate the isolation of this resort, on a 720-hectare (1,780-acre) private island south of Tortola and east of St. John. Reaching it requires a 30-minute waterborne transfer, which many urban refugees consider part of the fun. It's very laid-back—bring your new spouse and a good book, and enjoy the comings and goings of yachts at the island's private marina while you recover from the stress of your wedding. See p. 203.
- **Hyatt Regency Grand Cayman** (Grand Cayman; ☎ **800/233-1234** in the U.S., or 345/949-1234): Hands down, this is the most glamorous and best-landscaped resort in the Cayman Islands. Honeymooners can buy a package that includes champagne and wine, a room with an oversize bed, a 1-day jeep rental, a romantic sundowner sail on a 12m (39-ft.) catamaran, and discounts at clothing stores, the resort's restaurants, and a golf course. They'll even present you with a honeymoon memento for your home. See p. 211.
- **Sandals Royal Caribbean** (Jamaica; ☎ **800/726-3257** in the U.S., or 876/953-2232): There are a handful of members of this resort chain in Jamaica alone (plus three others on St. Lucia, one in Turks and Caicos, and yet another one on the island of Antigua that is far less grand). Each prides itself on providing an all-inclusive (cash-free) environment where meals are provided in abundance. Enthusiastic members of the staff bring heroic amounts of community spirit to ceremonies celebrated on-site. Sandals provides everything from a preacher to petunias (as well as champagne, a cake, and all the legalities) for you to get hitched here. Any of these resorts can provide a suitable setting, but one of the most appealing is **Sandals Royal Caribbean**, outside Montego Bay, Jamaica. See p. 366.
- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Puerto Rico; ☎ **800/468-5228** or 787/863-1000): A complex of hotels set on a forested bluff overlooking the sea, this is one of the most lavish resorts ever built in the Caribbean. The architecture incorporates Moorish gardens and Andalusian fortresses. You'll find hammocks for two on the resort's offshore private island, as well as about a dozen private Jacuzzis artfully concealed by vegetation throughout the grounds. See p. 496.
- **The Horned Dorset Primavera** (Puerto Rico; ☎ **800/633-1857** or 787/823-4030): This is the most elegant, intimate, secluded, romantic inn in Puerto Rico. It has private plunge pools; a cantilevered porch over the sea perfect for champagne at

sunset; a fabulous candlelit restaurant; vast, well-equipped bathrooms with tubs big enough for two; sea-view balconies; romantic four-poster beds; and a discreet, helpful staff that doesn't interfere with honeymooners who want to be alone. See p. 487.

- **Golden Lemon Inn & Villas** (St. Kitts; ☎ 800/633-7411 in the U.S., or 869/465-7260): It started its life as a French manor house during the 17th century, but by the time its present owners began restoring it, the Golden Lemon was decidedly less glamorous. It required the refined tastes of Arthur Leaman, a former editor at *House & Garden*, to bring it to its full potential. Today the Golden Lemon is an authentic Antillean retreat—luxurious, laid-back, and romantic—set in an isolated fishing village loaded with charm. See p. 543.
- **Four Seasons Resort Nevis** (Nevis; ☎ 800/332-3442 in the U.S., 800/268-6282 in Canada, or 869/469-1111): Though not as historic as some of the island's plantation-style inns, the Four Seasons rules without peer as the most deluxe hotel on the island, with the most extensive facilities. Set in a palm grove adjacent to the island's finest beach, it has the atmosphere of a supremely indulgent country club. The Four Seasons offers a 4-day wedding package with a choice of ceremony styles (in a church or on a beach, with a judge or with a civil magistrate). The resort's pastry chef designs each wedding cake individually, and the staff can arrange music, photographs, flowers, legalities, and virtually anything else you want. See p. 555.
- **Anse Chastanet** (St. Lucia; ☎ 800/223-1108 in the U.S., or 758/459-7000): Offering panoramic views of mountains and jungle, this intimate hotel is a winner with romantics.

With its small size, it offers a lot of privacy and rustic charm. Its wedding package includes all legal processing, a wedding cake, and champagne, and add-ons cover everything from photography to a post-wedding sunset sail. See p. 571.

- **Petit St. Vincent Resort** (The Grenadines; ☎ 954/963-7401): If your idea of a honeymoon is to run away from everybody except your new spouse, this is the place. It takes about three planes and a boat to reach it, but the effort to get here is worth it, if you want total isolation and privacy. Even the staff doesn't bother you unless you raise a flag for room service. If the honeymoon's going well, you may never have to leave your stone cottage by the beach. The artfully built clubhouses and bungalows were crafted from tropical woods and local stone. The results are simultaneously rustic and lavish. See p. 644.
- **The Cotton House** (The Grenadines; ☎ 784/456-4777): Cosmopolitan and stylish, this hotel was built as a cotton warehouse on the tiny island of Mustique during the 18th century. It's intimate, exclusive, and full of undeniable charm and romance. See p. 639.
- **Le Grand Courlan Resort & Spa** (Tobago; ☎ 868/639-9667): This is the favorite honeymoon retreat on Tobago. If you want to be fussed over, you and your new spouse can attend the spa for relaxing massages, or you can be left entirely alone to enjoy the bay outside your window or the sandy beach at your doorstep. From Guyanese hardwood to Italian porcelain, the decor is refined and elegant. See p. 664.
- **The Buccaneer** (St. Croix; ☎ 800/255-3881 in the U.S., or 340/773-2100): Posh and discreet, this resort boasts some of the most extensive

vacation facilities on St. Croix—three beaches, eight tennis courts, a spa and fitness center, an 18-hole golf course, and 3km (2 miles) of carefully maintained jogging trails. The accommodations include beachside rooms with

fieldstone terraces leading toward the sea. The resort's stone sugar mill (originally built in 1658) is one of the most popular sites for weddings and visiting honeymooners on the island. See p. 726.

8 The Best Places to Get Away from It All

In addition to the choices below, see also the listings under “The Best Places to Honeymoon” for information on Peter Island Resort in the British Virgin Islands, and Petit St. Vincent Resort and The Cotton House, both in The Grenadines.

- **Biras Creek Estate** (Virgin Gorda, B.V.I.; ☎ 800/223-1108 in the U.S., or 310/440-4225): The only access to this resort is by private launch. The sea air and the views over islets, cays, and deep blue waters will relax you in your charming guest room. The nautical atmosphere will quickly remove all thoughts of the 9-to-5 job you left behind.
- **Guana Island Club** (Guana Island, B.V.I.; ☎ 800/544-8262 in the U.S., or 284/494-2354): One of the most secluded hideaways in the entire Caribbean, this resort occupies a privately owned 340-hectare (840-acre) bird sanctuary with nature trails. Head here for views of rare plant and animal life and for several excellent uncrowded beaches. See p. 204.

- **Little Cayman Beach Resort** (Cayman Islands; ☎ 800/327-3835 in the U.S. and Canada, or 345/948-1033): The only practical way to reach the 26-sq.-km (10-sq.-mile) island where this resort is located is by airplane. Snorkelers will marvel at some of the most spectacular and colorful marine life in the Caribbean. The resort has the most complete watersports facilities on the island, and bikes are available for exploring. See p. 228.
- **Rawlins Plantation Inn** (St. Kitts; ☎ 800/346-5358 in the U.S., or 869/465-6221): Surrounded by 5 hectares (12 acres) of carefully manicured lawns and tropical shrubbery, and set on a panoramic hillock about 100m (330 ft.) above sea level, this hotel with its rugs of locally woven rushes and carved four-poster beds evokes a 19th-century plantation. You'll be separated from the rest of the island by hundreds of acres of sugar cane, and there are few phones and no televisions. See p. 543.

9 The Best Family Vacations

- **Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort & Casino** (Aruba; ☎ 800/233-1234 in the U.S. and Canada, or 297/58-61234): Designed like a luxurious hacienda, with award-winning gardens, this resort is the most upscale on Aruba. Supervised activities for children 3 to 12 include games and contests such as crab races and hula-hoop competitions. See p. 108.
- **Sandy Beach Island Resort** (Barbados; ☎ 800/448-8355 in the U.S., or 246/435-8000): Set amid lots of fast-food and family-style restaurants on the southwest coast, this family-oriented hotel offers one- and two-bedroom suites. Each unit has a kitchen, so you can cook for yourself and save money. The beach is a few steps away, and the ambience is

informal. If you bring the kids, they'll have plenty of playmates. See p. 140.

- **Hyatt Regency Grand Cayman** (Grand Cayman Island; ☎ 800/233-1234 in the U.S., or 345/949-1234): Safe and serene, Grand Cayman Island, with its 11km (6¾-mile) sandy beach, seems designed for families with children. No one coddles children as much as the Hyatt people, who offer not only babysitting but also Camp Hyatt, with an activity-filled agenda, for children 3 to 12. See p. 211.
- **Breezes Curaçao** (Curaçao; ☎ 599/9-736-7888): One of the most welcoming resorts for families is Breezes Curaçao, which features the best kiddie programs on island in its on-site Camp Breezes. Making it even more fun for children, the inclusive resort lies next to both the Undersea National Park and the Sea Aquarium and opens onto one of Curaçao's most beautiful and longest beaches. See p. 235.
- **Sunset at the Palms Resort & Spa** (Negril, Jamaica; ☎ 800/234-1707 in the U.S., or 876/957-5350): Rising on stilts, these wooden cottages with private decks add a sense of adventure to a beach vacation. Surrounded by tropical vegetation, families are only steps from the beach. Features for kids include a playground, computer games, arts-and-crafts lessons, and even storytelling sessions. Children under 2 stay free if they share a room with their parent; children 2 to 12 are \$25 extra. See p. 384.
- **FDR** (Runaway Bay, Jamaica; ☎ 888/337-5437 in the U.S., or 876/973-4592): FDR gives you a suite with its own kitchen, and a "vacation nanny" whose duties include babysitting. Neither its beach nor its pool is the most appealing on Jamaica, but the price is right, and the babysitting is part of the all-inclusive deal. Programs for children include dress-up parties, donkey rides, basketball, tennis, and snorkeling. See p. 402.
- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Puerto Rico; ☎ 800/468-5228 or 787/863-1000): Children aren't forgotten amid the glamour and hoopla of this fabulous resort. Camp Coquí provides day care daily from 9am to 3pm for children 3 to 12, at a price of \$40 per child per day. Activities include fishing, sailing, arts and crafts, and nature treks. Babysitting services are available, and children 15 and under stay free in a room with a parent. See p. 496.
- **Four Seasons Resort Nevis** (Nevis; ☎ 800/332-3442 in the U.S., 800/268-6282 in Canada, or 869/469-1111): The staff of the Kids for All Seasons day camp are kindly, matronly souls who work well with children. During the adult cocktail hour, when parents might opt for a romantic sundowner, kids attend a supervised children's hour that resembles a really good birthday bash. Other kid-friendly activities include tennis lessons, watersports, and storytelling. See p. 555.
- **The Buccaneer** (St. Croix; ☎ 800/255-3881 in the U.S., or 340/773-2100): Posh, upscale, and offering extremely good service, this hotel is a longtime favorite that occupies a 96-hectare (240-acre) former sugar estate. Its kids' programs (ages 2–12) include a half-day sailing excursion to Buck Island Reef and guided nature walks that let kids touch, smell, and taste tropical fruit. See p. 726.

10 The Best Inns

- **Admiral's Inn** (Antigua; ☎ 268/460-1027): The most historically evocative corner of Antigua is Nelson's Dockyard, which was originally built in the 1700s to repair His Majesty's ships. The brick-and-stone inn that flourishes here today was once a warehouse for turpentine and pitch. In the late 1960s it was transformed into a well-designed and very charming hotel. **Note:** If you're sensitive to noise, you might be bothered by the sometimes raucous bar and restaurant. See p. 83.
- **Avila Beach Hotel** (Curaçao; ☎ 800/747-8162 or 599/9-461-4377): This hotel's historic core, built in 1780 as the "country house" of the island's governor, retains its dignity and simplicity. Although it's been a hotel since the end of World War II, a new owner added 40 bedrooms in motel-like outbuildings and upgraded the sports and dining facilities in the early 1990s. Today the Avila provides a sandy beach and easy access to the shops and distractions of nearby Willemstad. See p. 235.
- **Spice Island Beach Resort** (Grenada; ☎ 846/628-1701 in the U.S., or 473/444-4258): Each of this hotel's 66 units is a suite (with Jacuzzi) either beside the beach (one of Grenada's best) or near a swimming pool. Friday night features live music from the island's most popular bands. See p. 308.
- **François Plantation** (St. Barthélemy; ☎ 590/29-80-22): At this inn, about a dozen pastel-colored bungalows are scattered among the lushest gardens on St. Barts. The mood is discreet, permissive, and fun. The food is French-inspired and served on a wide veranda decorated in a whimsical colonial style. See p. 515.
- **Ottley's Plantation Inn** (St. Kitts; ☎ 800/772-3039 in the U.S., or 869/465-7234): As you approach, the inn's dignified verandas appear majestically at the crest of 14 hectares (35 acres) of impeccably maintained lawns and gardens. It's one of the most charming plantation-house inns anywhere in the world, maintained with style and humor by its expatriate U.S. owners. The food is the best on the island, and the setting will soothe your tired nerves within a few hours after you arrive. See p. 543.
- **Montpelier Plantation Inn** (Nevis; ☎ 869/469-3462): Style and grace are the hallmarks of this former 18th-century plantation, now converted to an inn and set on a 40-hectare (100-acre) estate. Guests have included the late Princess of Wales. Cottage rooms are spread across 4 hectares (10 acres) of ornamental gardens. Swimming, horseback riding, windsurfing, a private beach, and "eco-rambles" fill the agenda. See p. 556.
- **The Hermitage Beach Club** (Nevis; ☎ 800/682-4025 in the U.S., or 869/469-3477): Guests stay in clapboard-sided cottages separated by carefully maintained bougainvillea and grasslands. The beach is a short drive away, but this slice of 19th-century plantation life (complete with candlelit dinners amid the antiques and polished silver of the main house) is decidedly romantic. See p. 556.
- **The Frangipani** (Bequia, The Grenadines; ☎ 784/458-3255): This is the century-old homestead of the Mitchell family, whose most famous scion later became prime minister of St. Vincent. Today, it's a small, very relaxed inn. It's fun to watch the yachts setting out to sea from the nearby marina. See p. 634.

- **Villa Madeleine** (St. Croix; ☎ 800/496-7379 in the U.S., or 340/778-8782): This recently built, almost perfect re-creation of a 19th-century great house occupies the summit of a

scrub-covered ridge. The food is among the best on St. Croix. Accommodations include richly furnished hideaway suites with sweeping views over the coastline. See p. 726.

11 The Best Destinations for Serious Shoppers

Because the U.S. government allows its citizens to take (or send) home more duty-free goods from the U.S. Virgins than from other ports of call, the U.S. Virgin Islands remain the shopping bazaar of the Caribbean. U.S. citizens may carry home \$1,400 worth of goods untaxed, as opposed to only \$400 to \$600 worth of goods from most other islands in the Caribbean. (The only exception to this rule is Puerto Rico, where any purchase, regardless of the amount, can be carried tax free back to the U.S. mainland.) St. Maarten/St. Martin, which is ruled jointly by France and the Netherlands, gives the Virgins some serious shopping competition. It is virtually a shopper's mall, especially on the Dutch side. Although the U.S. doesn't grant the generous customs allowances on St. Maarten/St. Martin that it does to its own islands, the island doesn't have duty so you still can find some lovely bargains.

- **Aruba:** The wisest shoppers on Aruba are cost-conscious souls who have carefully checked the prices of comparable goods before leaving home. Duty is relatively low (only 3.3%). Much of the European china, jewelry, perfumes, watches, and crystal has a disconcerting habit of reappearing in every shopping mall and hotel boutique on the island, so after you determine exactly which brand of watch or china you want, you can comparison shop. See chapter 5.
- **Barbados:** Local shops seem to specialize in all things English. Merchandise includes bone china from British and Irish manufacturers, watches,

jewelry, and perfumes. Bridgetown's Broad Street is the shopping headquarters of the island, although some of the stores here maintain boutiques (with similar prices but a less extensive range of merchandise) at many of the island's hotels and in malls along the congested southwestern coast. Except for cigarettes and tobacco, duty-free items can be hauled off by any buyer as soon as they're paid for. Duty-free status is extended to anyone showing a passport or ID and an airline ticket with a date of departure from Barbados. See chapter 6.

- **The Cayman Islands:** Goods are sold tax free from a daunting collection of malls and minimalls throughout Grand Cayman. Most of these are along the highway that parallels Seven Mile Beach; you'll need a car to shop around. There are also lots of stores in George Town, which you can explore on foot, poking in and out of some large emporiums in your search for bargains. See chapter 9.
- **Curaçao:** In the island's capital, tidy and prosperous Willemstad, hundreds of merchants are only too happy to cater to your needs. A handful of malls lies on Willemstad's outskirts, but most shops are clustered within a few blocks of the center of town. During seasonal sales, goods might be up to 50% less than comparable prices in the United States; most of the year, you'll find luxury items (porcelain, crystal, watches, and gemstones) priced at about 25% less than in the U.S. Technically,

you'll pay import duties on virtually everything you buy, but rates are so low you may not even notice. See chapter 10.

- **The Dominican Republic:** The island's best buys include handicrafts, amber from Dominican mines, and the distinctive pale-blue semiprecious gemstone known as *larimar*. The amber sold by street vendors may be nothing more than orange-colored, transparent plastic; buy only from well-established shops if your investment is a large one. Other charming souvenirs might include a Dominican rocking chair (JFK used to sit in one), which is sold boxed, in ready-to-assemble pieces. Malls and souvenir stands abound in Santo Domingo, in Puerto Plata, and along the country's northern coast. See chapter 12.
- **Jamaica:** The shopping was better in the good old days, before taxes added a 10% surcharge. Despite that, Jamaica offers a wealth of desirable goods, including flavored rums, Jamaican coffees, handicrafts (such as woodcarvings, woven baskets, and sandals), original paintings and sculpture, and cameras, watches, and DVD players. Unless you're a glutton for handmade souvenirs (which are available on virtually every beach and street corner), you'd be wise to limit most of your purchases to bona fide merchants and stores. See chapter 15.
- **Puerto Rico:** For U.S. citizens, there's no duty on anything bought in Puerto Rico. That doesn't guarantee that prices will be particularly low, however. You'll find lots of jewelry and watches, often at competitive prices, especially in the island's best-stocked area, Old San Juan. Also of great interest are such Puerto Rican handicrafts as charming folkloric papier-mâché carnival masks and

santos, carved wooden figures depicting saints. See chapter 17.

- **St. Maarten/St. Martin:** Because of the massive influx of cruise ships, shopping in Dutch St. Maarten is now about the finest in the Caribbean, though you may have to fight the crowds. Because there's no duty, prices can be 30% to 50% lower than in the U.S. Forget about local crafts and concentrate on leather goods, electronics, cameras, designer fashions, watches, and crystal, along with linens and jewelry. Philipsburg, capital of the island's Dutch side, is the best place to shop. Although it can't compete with Dutch St. Maarten, French St. Martin is becoming a more popular shopping destination, especially for goods such as fashion or perfumes imported from France. See chapter 23.
- **St. Thomas:** Many of its busiest shops are in restored warehouses that were originally built in the 1700s. Charlotte Amalie, the capital, is a shopper's town, with a staggering number of stores stocked with more merchandise than anywhere else in the entire Caribbean. However, despite all the fanfare, real bargains are hard to come by. Regardless, the island attracts hordes of cruise-ship passengers on a sometimes-frantic hunt for bargains, real or imagined. Look for two local publications, *This Week* and *Best Buys*; either might steer you to the type of merchandise you're seeking. If at all possible, try to avoid shopping when more than one cruise ship is in port—the shopping district is a madhouse on those days. See chapter 27.
- **St. Croix:** This island doesn't have the massive shopping development of St. Thomas, but its merchandise has never been more wide-ranging than it

is today. Even though most cruise ships call at Frederiksted, with its urban mall, our favorite shops are in Christiansted, which boasts many

one-of-a-kind boutiques and a lot of special finds. Prices are about the same here as on St. Thomas. See chapter 27.

12 The Best Nightlife

Nighttime is sleep time on the British Virgins, Montserrat, Nevis, Anguilla, St. Eustatius, Saba, St. Barts, Dominica, Bonaire, St. Vincent, and all of The Grenadines. The serious partier will probably want to choose one of the following destinations.

- **Aruba:** This island has 10 casinos, each with its own unique decor and each with a following of devoted gamblers. Some offer their own cabarets and comedy shows, dance floors with live or recorded music, restaurants of all degrees of formality, and bars. The casinos are big, splashy, colorful, and, yes, people even occasionally win. Drinks are usually free while you play. The legal tender in most of Aruba's casinos is the U.S. dollar. See chapter 5.
- **Barbados:** Bridgetown is home to at least two boats (the *Bajan Queen* and the *Jolly Roger*) that embark at sundown for rum-and-reggae cruises, as well as oversize music bars like Harbour Lights. Otherwise, a host of bars, British-style pubs, dozens of restaurants, and dance clubs (both within and outside large hotels) beckon from St. Lawrence Gap or the crowded southwest coast. See chapter 6.
- **Curaçao:** Although outdistanced by Aruba, the action spinning around the island's casinos make this one of the southern Caribbean's hot spots for gamblers. Salinja, a sector of Willemstad, has lively bars where locals and visitors drink and party until the wee hours, and live jazz often fills the air. See chapter 10.
- **The Dominican Republic:** Large resort hotels in the Dominican Republic evoke a Latino version of Las Vegas. If cabaret shows aren't your thing, there are enough dance clubs in the major towns and resorts to keep nightclubbers busy for weeks. The tourist areas of Puerto Plata and Santo Domingo are sprinkled with casinos, and the island's ever-developing north shore contains its share of jingle-jangle, too. Our favorite is the casino in the Renaissance Jaragua Hotel & Casino in Santo Domingo, which offers floor shows, live merengue concerts, a wraparound bar, and at least five different restaurants. See chapter 12.
- **Jamaica:** Many visitors are drawn here by a love for the island's distinct musical forms. Foremost among these are reggae and soca, both of which are performed at hotels, resorts, and raffish dives all over the island. Hotels often stage folkloric shows that include entertainers who sing, dance, swallow torches, and walk on broken glass. There are also plenty of indoor/outdoor bars where you might actually be able to talk to people. See chapter 15.
- **Puerto Rico:** Puerto Rico contains all the raw ingredients for great nightlife, including casinos, endless rows of bars and taverns, cabaret shows with girls and glitter, and dance clubs that feature everything from New York imports to some of the best salsa and merengue anywhere. The country's gaming headquarters lies along the

Condado in San Juan, although there are also casinos in megaresorts scattered throughout the island. The casinos here are the most fun in the Caribbean, and they're also some of the most spectacular. Each contains lots of sideshows (restaurants, merengue bars, art galleries, piano bars, and shops) that can distract you from the roulette and slots. Puerto Ricans take pride in dressing well at their local casinos, which enhances an evening's glamour. (**Note:** You can't drink at the tables.) If you're a really serious partyer, you'll have lots of company in Puerto Rico. Be prepared to stay out very late; you can recover from your Bacardi hang-over on a palm-fringed beach the next day. See chapter 17.

- **St. Maarten/St. Martin:** This island has a rather cosmopolitan nightlife

and contains the densest concentration of restaurants in the Caribbean, each with its own bar. Dance clubs are often indoor/outdoor affairs. Hotel casinos abound on the Dutch side, and if you're addicted to the jingle of slot machines and roulette wheels, you won't lack for company. The casinos tend to be low-key, which might appeal to you if you dislike high-stakes tables with lots of intensity. See chapter 23.

- **St. Thomas:** The Virgin Islands' most active nightlife is found here. Don't expect glitzy shows like those in San Juan's Condado area, and don't expect any kind of casino. But you'll find plenty of fun at the beach bars, restaurants, concerts, clubs, and folklore and reggae shows. See chapter 27.