

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of the Caribbean

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Having fun on land and sea
- ▶ Seeking out honeymoon havens, family resorts, and everything in between
- ▶ Enjoying sports and outdoor recreation
- ▶ Going out on the town: dining, shopping, and nightlife

Whatever you want to do on a tropical vacation — play on the beach with the kids (or with your mate), enjoy a romantic honeymoon, go scuba diving to meet the denizens of the deep — you'll find it on one of the Caribbean islands. We don't want you to waste precious hours searching for the best beaches or the best experiences, so we've done all the legwork for you. Following are our picks for the finest the Caribbean has to offer.

### *The Best Beaches*

- ✓ **Palm Beach (Aruba):** Hailed by such magazines as *Condé Nast Traveler* as one of the best beaches in the world, the powder-white sands of Palm Beach put Aruba on the tourist map. On the tranquil leeward side of the island, this beach is set against a backdrop of Aruba's leading resorts. When there weren't enough palm trees for that Caribbean portrait of cliché charm, the government planted more. For beach buffs, Palm Beach is about as good as it gets in the Caribbean. See Chapter 9.
- ✓ **The Gold Coast (Barbados):** Some aficionados call this strip of white sand on the island's tranquil western coast "the Platinum Coast." Either name will do. This isn't one beach but a string of white-sand beaches that lie along this coast — take your pick. Naturally, all the swanky and fabled Barbados resorts chose this coastline for their tony locations. Expect tropical gardens, miles of palm trees, and secluded little coves with shallow reefs teeming with rainbow-hued fish. The shoreline is overcrowded and overbuilt, but this coast has plenty of sand and water for everyone. See Chapter 10.

- ✓ **Seven Mile Beach (Grand Cayman):** Beginning north of George Town, the capital, this beautiful beach of white sand stretches for 8.8km (5½ miles). So, technically, it's not 7 miles, but when you're here that hardly seems to matter. With its deluxe resorts and string of small hotels and condos, this rather overbuilt beach evokes Aruba's Palm Beach. But even in winter when the resorts operate at peak capacity, the sands and tranquil waters still have plenty of room for everybody — families, honeymooners, and singles alike. Australian pines form a backdrop, and the beach strip offers an array of water sports. Most people describe its waters as translucent aquamarine. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Seven Mile Beach (Negril, Jamaica):** The Caribbean has another seven mile beach, and this one is actually 11km (7 miles) long, unlike the sandy coast of Grand Cayman. The Jamaican beach at this hedonistic resort is the biggest party beach in the West Indies. Envision an adult summer camp at its raunchiest — plenty of nudity, drinking, and illicit drugs. With all this debauchery, you may forget the sands and sea. That'd be a mistake. They're spectacular. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Luquillo Beach (Puerto Rico):** Lying 48km (30 miles) east of San Juan, this crescent-shaped public beach of golden sand is the best the island has to offer. Set near the tacky town of Luquillo, the beach stretches for 0.8km (½ mile) along a crescent-shaped bay fronting a backdrop of coconut palms. *Sanjuaneros* (you know, natives of San Juan) flock here by the hundreds on weekends for fun in the sun, but weekdays are more tranquil. A festive party atmosphere prevails here, with many water-sports kiosks to hook you up with everything from sailing to windsurfing. Dozens of beach shacks offer tasty island snacks such as cod fritters. See Chapter 14.

## The Best Places to Get Away from It All

- ✓ **Guavaberry Spring Bay Vacation Homes (Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands):** On the idyllic island of Virgin Gorda, the second island of the British Virgin chain, stands Guavaberry Spring Bay Vacation Homes at **Spring Bay**, with 18 redwood-built hexagonal houses in a tropical setting of flowers and shrubs. Lodging here is like being in your own private little Caribbean villa. An on-site commissary sells provisions for your home-cooked meals. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Morritt's Tortuga Club and Resort (Grand Cayman):** Tucked away in the eastern sector of this island, 42km (26 miles) from the international airport, stands this plantation-style escapist's retreat. Living is condo-style here on 3.2 beachfront hectares (8 acres). Because the area is known for its excellent diving, many scuba divers check in here — but the resort is suitable for nondivers as

well, with its two pools (one with a waterfall) and comfortably furnished one- and two-bedroom town houses, each with a fully equipped kitchen. See Chapter 12.

- ✔ **Banana Shout Resort (Negril, Jamaica):** If you want your Caribbean life to be laid-back, like it was in the 1950s, you might head to this offbeat resort in fun-loving Negril. Set on 1 hectare (2½ acres) of tropical gardens with waterfalls, it isn't for the faint of heart. You can find the resort in **West End**, where you can still see hippies who arrived in the 1960s and never left — nor changed their flower-child garb. Your host is Detroit-born Mark Conklin, a psychologist who wrote a racy and hilarious novel of local life called *Banana Shout*. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Jake's (Treasure Beach, Jamaica):** On Jamaica's southern shoreline, east of Negril, Jake's is funky and fun. Trouble is, if you check in, you may never leave. The ultimate escapist's retreat, this place is even more laid-back than Negril, which appears almost cosmopolitan from Jake's perspective. Built on a cliff overlooking a panoramic bay, the complex consists of 15 cottages and 4 villas, everything evocative of a casbah in Morocco. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Hacienda Tamarindo (Vieques, Puerto Rico):** Two Vermonters on the island of Vieques, off the coast of Puerto Rico, have created this idyllic 16-room inn that lies 0.6km (1 mile) west of the main settlement of Esperanza, but far removed from any bustling life. Now that the U.S. Navy presence is gone (and they're no longer testing weapons on the island), Vieques has returned to its once-sleepy state. A footpath leads to a pool and the beach. Walking it is about all the strenuous activity you need to perform here. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Pavilions and Pools Hotel (St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands):** To find an escapist's retreat on this overbuilt and overcrowded island is a bit of an achievement, but Pavilions and Pools is such a place. The 25-room resort lies 11km (7 miles) east of the capital of Charlotte Amalie. It stands close to one of the island's best beaches, **Sapphire Bay**. Ensured total privacy, you get your own villa here, with wide doors opening directly onto your own private swimming pool where you can bathe as Adam and Eve did (or Adam/Adam, Eve/Eve, whatever). See Chapter 17.

## *The Best Honeymoon Resorts*

- ✔ **Sandy Lane Hotel & Golf Club (St. James, Barbados):** The classiest resort in the southern Caribbean, Sandy Lane is a celebrity-haunted retreat of the rich and famous. On the **Gold Coast** of Barbados, this place is clearly the star attraction as resorts go. As soon as a honeymoon couple — or any guest, for that matter — enters this coral-stone Palladian-style mansion, they're pampered and coddled in supreme comfort. Romantic couples generally

request one of the sumptuous suites that come with luxurious bathrooms and even their own personal butler. See Chapter 10.

- ✓ **Sandals Dunn's River Villagio Beach & Spa (Ocho Rios, Jamaica):** An estimated three-fourths of the guests here are young honeymooners (make that male/female romantics only — other couplings are strictly prohibited in the Sandals chain). One of the better members of the Sandals all-inclusive chains taking over Jamaica, this North Coast resort opens onto a wide beach of white sands. Complete honeymoon packages are available, the price fluctuating with the season. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Horned Dorset Primavera (Rincón, Puerto Rico):** The most special and romantic inn on the West Coast of Puerto Rico is both secluded and elegant, a 52-room bastion of luxury, taste, and refinement where two people can be alone and undisturbed until they're ready to emerge again into the real world. A Relais & Châteaux property, this pocket of posh is set in an enchanted garden with a large swimming pool. Bedrooms are custom-designed and fitted with four-poster beds. Opt for one of the delicious suites facing the sea. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Ladera Resort (St. Lucia):** Why not begin your new life together by waking up and taking in the most panoramic and dramatic view in the Caribbean? That view is of Gros Piton and Petit Piton, twin volcanic cones soaring straight up out of the earth from some prehistoric past. Your hilltop aerie here has no west wall, but don't worry that a Peeping Tom will share your honeymoon with you. The Bali Ha'i-like villas were designed so that your privacy won't be violated. Villas have private pools fed by waterfalls. How romantic can you get? See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **La Samanna (Sint Maarten/St. Martin):** On a totally secluded rooftop sun deck, honeymooners often discover love in the afternoon, with only the wild birds expressing shock. In this Casablanca-like village complex, you live lush and plush at the island's finest luxury nest, either on the Dutch or French side. Everything here is designed to put you in the mood, from a romantic terrace on a bluff overlooking the moonlit bay to even the bar, crowned by a multihued Indian wedding tent. A Caribbean cliché? Perhaps — but lovely just the same. All couplings are welcome here. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **The Buccaneer (St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands):** Many couples not only prefer a honeymoon here, but they also get married on the premises. The hotel staff can take care of all the arrangements. The lush setting, 3.2km (2 miles) east of the main town of Christiansted, is on a 138-hectare (340-acre) site, a former cattle ranch and sugar plantation. Honeymooners enjoy the property's deluxe facilities, including a first-rate golf course. The cuisine, the accommodations (including a romantic four-poster bed), and the facilities are the best on the island. See Chapter 17.

## The Best Family Resorts

- ✔ **Occidental Grand Aruba (Aruba):** Opening right onto Aruba's fabled **Palm Beach**, this handsomely landscaped all-inclusive resort has long been a family favorite. Its children's programs for ages 4 to 12 are among the best on the island and are well supervised and planned. Families frolic daily around the mammoth free-form pool with its cascading waterfalls — a Disney-like setting. Kids delight in the iguanas roaming the property, who are looking for a handout. See Chapter 9.
- ✔ **Turtle Beach (Barbados):** The flagship of a London-based chain, this all-inclusive resort is the most family oriented on this populous island in the southern Caribbean. Many families book package deals here to take advantage of the resort's Kids Club (ages 3–11), which is the best on the island and includes such fun activities as treasure hunts, painting, and safari-style island expeditions. Throughout the year, the resort offers packages for children. In the off season, for example, one child (age 2–12) stays free, and any others pay half the adult rate. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Little Dix Bay (Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands):** This 98-room posh resort opens onto a half-moon-shaped private bay with a sandy beach, occupying a 200-hectare (500-acre) protected preserve. Some families book a return every year. Not only does it offer the best children's program in the British Virgin Islands, but Little Dix Bay is also a luxuriously comfortable place to stay, filled with many diversions for any age. Families delight in taking up residence in the two-story rondavels designed like Tiki huts on stilts. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Westin Casuarina Resort (Grand Cayman):** Occupying some of the best beachfront along palm-lined **Seven Mile Beach**, this top-ranking resort operates the most activity-filled calendar on the island, yet isn't obtrusive for those families seeking some R & R. Its Camp Scallywag features the best children's program on the island for ages 4 to 12. Bedrooms can accommodate even large families comfortably. The resort's pool is one of the largest on the island. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Half Moon (Montego Bay, Jamaica):** Kids view this sprawling resort — one of the greatest in Jamaica — as a virtual Shangri-La, with their own special pool, playhouses, donkey rides, and other diversions. The beachfront is one of the best occupied by any Jamaican resort — and, indeed, it's shaped like a half-moon and sheltered by a reef offshore, making it safe for swimming. Special programs occupy teens who are far too mature to settle for "all that under-12 kid stuff." See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Club St. Lucia by Splash (St. Lucia):** This all-inclusive resort lies at the very northern tip of the lush island and is the best bet for families visiting St. Lucia. It wisely divides its children's clubs into three different age groups, recognizing the varied and different interests

each grouping of kids may have. Not only does the resort open onto two white sandy beaches, but it's also close to the **Pigeon Island National Park**, long a family favorite for adventure and a picnic. Families stay in one of five fantasy villages, with such amusing names as "Banana Liming." The spacious family suites are the best on the island. See Chapter 15.

## The Best Restaurants

- ✓ **The Cliff (Barbados):** Paul Owens, who's published his prizewinning recipes in a cookbook, is clearly the master chef of Barbados, where the competition is fierce. His highly creative spin on international and Caribbean cuisine attracts a never-ending stream of some of the most discerning palates in the world. The setting for his sublime cuisine is on open-air terraces spilling down to a coral cliff overlooking the sea. See Chapter 10.
- ✓ **Norma's on the Terrace (Kingston, Jamaica):** Norma Shirley is the most celebrated chef on this island. Her culinary wares are showcased at the landmark Devon House in Jamaica's capital. Her menu changes with the season but reflects the flavors of Jamaica as few competitors do. She serves intensely flavored gutsy fare such as island lobster and conch, and her grilled fish, such as whole red snapper, are flavored with fresh herbs. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Parrot Club (San Juan, Puerto Rico):** The hottest restaurant in Old San Juan operates out of a converted hair-tonic factory. The chefs create the town's most finely honed *Nuevo Latino* cuisine, with intense island flavors and first-rate products, many from Puerto Rico itself. Expect a fresh sea flavor in the fish dishes and a touch of exoticism in many of the dishes, including seared pork medallions with a sweet plantain chorizo. Come here and make an evening of it. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Dasheene Restaurant and Bar (St. Lucia):** Between those two much-photographed volcanic peaks, Gros Piton and Petit Piton, this restaurant at the swank **Ladera Resort** focuses on a zesty international and West Indian cuisine — and does so exceedingly well. A meal at Dasheene will provide your most memorable and romantic dinner on this island. Exceptional products are prepared with a finely honed technique, and dishes such as seafood-studded pasta burst with flavors. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **La Vie en Rose (Sint Maarten/St. Martin):** This island, a dual nation (France and the Netherlands), has as its most famous restaurant a French classic. Located in the capital of Marigot on the French side, it's also the island's best and most dependable choice for fine (although pricey) dining. Tables are placed on a second-floor balcony overlooking the harbor, and the cuisine, always based on the best of current market offerings, displays forthright flavors. See Chapter 16.

- ✔ **Hervé Restaurant & Wine Bar (St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands):** Nowhere on this U.S. Virgin Island can you find such a harmonious blend of the kitchens of France, the West Indies, and the United States. Opening onto a panoramic view of the yacht-clogged harbor at Charlotte Amalie, the restaurant offers tables on a spacious terrace. Each season, the chef adds enticing new dishes to his repertoire, and diners take delight in the first-rate products deftly handled and beautifully served. It was here that we became addicted to mango cheesecake. See Chapter 17.

## The Best Active Vacations

Of course, the major sporting activities in the Caribbean revolve around scuba diving, snorkeling, fishing, sailing, playing tennis, and golfing. For the best of these activities, see the corresponding sections later in this chapter. However, here are some other outdoor diversions to consider:

- ✔ **Exploring the *cunucu* by Jeep (Aruba):** On the rugged, almost desertlike island of Aruba, you can travel into the interior — called the *cunucu* — with its cactus-studded terrain that evokes the outback in Australia. You'll encounter not only cacti but also birds, such as the *shoko* (owl) and the *prikichi* (the Aruban parakeet), plus other wildlife. Mammoth boulders, aloe plants, and the famous divi-divi trees (their coiffures permanently bent by the harsh winds) fill the landscape. To the northeast of the town of Hooiberg stand Casa Bari and Ayo, two building-size stacks of diorite boulders that evoke a lunar landscape. You can rent Jeeps and four-wheel-drive vehicles. See Chapter 9 for more on car rentals.
- ✔ **Windsurfing in Barbados:** In the Western Hemisphere, you'd have to go all the way to Hawaii to discover winds as good as those in the southern Caribbean off the island of Barbados. Windsurfers from all over the world flock here between November and April when trade winds are the most ideal for this increasingly popular sport. The best windsurfing is found at the shallow offshore reef of **Silver Sands**, where surfers reach speeds of up to 50 knots. For outfitters, refer to Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Scaling Jamaica's highest peaks:** The Blue Mountains, famed for "the java of kings" (their expensive mountain coffee), reach a pinnacle of 2,255m (7,400 ft.). Nowhere in the Caribbean are you treated to such dramatic and panoramic mountain scenery as you explore almost junglelike forests, cascading waterfalls, and roaring rivers. Many hikers arrive early just to watch the sun come up over these mountains. For the adventurer, organized hikes through these treacherous mountains may be a memory that lasts forever. For outfitters, see Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Hiking in a rain forest (Puerto Rico):** Officially called the **Caribbean National Forest**, islanders refer to it as *El Yunque*. Designated a forest

reserve by President Theodore Roosevelt, El Yunque is the only tropical rain forest in the U.S. National Park Service. Riddled with 11,331 hectares (27,988 acres) of trails, it lies only a 45-minute drive east of San Juan. One statistic alone suggests its enchantment for hikers: The forest has 240 species of tropical trees. It's also home to the rare Puerto Rican parrot as well as many other nearly extinct wildlife, including the Puerto Rican boa, growing to a length of 2.1m (7 ft.). The highest peak reaches 1,073m (3,519 ft.). Following the trail of the Indians, you can hike deep into this forest. See Chapter 14.

- ✓ **Galloping across St. Croix:** Our nomination for the Caribbean's finest stables is **Paul and Jill's Equestrian Stables** at Sprat Hall, the island's oldest plantation near Frederiksted on St. Croix, which is the largest of the U.S. Virgin Islands. You're taken on two-hour trail rides through a rain forest and along the beach. For a memorable romantic adventure, ask about moonlight expeditions. See Chapter 17.

## The Best Diving

- ✓ **Aruba:** The neighboring island of Bonaire is known for some of the best scuba diving in the Caribbean, ranking along with Grand Cayman. Scuba divers flock to Aruba, on the other hand, for its wreck diving. Aruba, along with Bermuda, is ranked near the top for wreck diving in the Caribbean and Atlantic. One of the most significant dive sites in the world is the **Antilla**, a German freighter that sank off Malmok Beach in World War II. For more details, see Chapter 9.
- ✓ **The British Virgin Islands:** This archipelago is better known for its sailing than its diving, but its waters contain the single most celebrated dive site in the Caribbean: the wreck of the **RMS Rhone**, the 93m (310-ft.) royal mail steamer that sank in 1867, lying in waters off the coast of Salt Island. *Skin Diver* magazine hailed it as "the world's most fantastic shipwreck dive," and the sunken ruins were featured in the Peter Benchley movie *The Deep*. Many scuba-diving outfitters in the BVIs link you up to this site. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Grand Cayman:** Scuba divers justifiably rate Grand Cayman as one of the world's top dive sites. The island boasts the best full-service dive operators in the Caribbean. They take you to spectacular coral reefs and the famous **Cayman Wall**, which plummets straight down for 150m (500 ft.) before becoming a steep slope. In addition to the reefs, you find old shipwrecks. Visibility of coral formations and exotic marine life can exceed 30m (100 ft.) in some places. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **St. Lucia:** Surrounded by coral reefs, St. Lucia offers excellent — not spectacular — diving, but it's some of the best in the southern Caribbean. Its multicolored reefs are beautiful to explore, and at the divers' hangout, **Anse Chastanet**, you can enjoy good diving right off the beach. Visibility of an astonishing 45m (150 ft.) has been



reported in some places off the coast. To make St. Lucia more of a temptation for divers, the government in recent years has deliberately sunk old boats off the coast, creating a haven for varied marine life. To hook up, check out Chapter 15.

- ✔ **Sint Maarten/St. Martin:** Divers report some of the greatest underwater visibility in the Caribbean off the shores of this island with its dual nationality (France and the Netherlands). Visibility extends from 23 to 38m (75–125 ft.). Countless hidden coves beckon adventurous scuba divers. A major site is the **HMS *Proselyte***, a British man-of-war that went down in 1801. Both the French and Dutch sides of the island have outfitters who link you with this underwater world. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands:** With its series of 30 magnificent coral reefs, St. Thomas is rated by *Skin Diver* magazine as one of the best underwater worlds in the West Indies. The best scuba diving takes place at **Cow and Calf Rocks** at the southeastern end of the island. Divers discover a network of coral tunnels riddled with caves. Another popular dive site is ***Cartanser Sr.***, a sunken World War II cargo lying in water 11m (35 ft.) deep. St. Thomas offers highly respected outfitters. Find out more about St. Thomas in Chapter 17.

## The Best Snorkeling

- ✔ **Aruba:** Snorkeling just offshore is limited on Aruba, but boats sail out for some fascinating trips. The highlight is a stop at ***Antilla***, the German freighter sunk off the coast in World War II (see the preceding section). This wreck is one of the few close enough to the surface for snorkelers to enjoy. You can enjoy the best snorkeling trips on the island by sailing aboard ***Mi Dushi***, a Swedish vessel built in 1925. Today it specializes in four-hour guided snorkeling trips. See Chapter 9 for details.
- ✔ **Barbados:** Although it has nothing to compare with Buck Island off St. Croix, snorkelers in Barbados find that it's well worth their time to rent some gear. The **Carlisle Bay Marine Reserve** is shallow enough for snorkeling, and the bay teems with such marine life as hawksbill turtles and sea horses. At the **Folkestone Marine Park**, you can rent snorkeling gear and explore an underwater trail around Dottin's Reef. See Chapter 10 for more information.
- ✔ **Stingray City (Grand Cayman):** Lying 3.2km (2 miles) off the northwestern tip of Grand Cayman, this unique snorkeling site is called the best 3.6m (12-ft.) dive site in the world. Hordes of graceful stingrays swim by you. Originally, the stingrays were lured to this feeding station when local fishermen began dumping their leftovers overboard — the fish flocked here to feed off the debris. The phenomenon continues, much to the delight of snorkelers. See Chapter 12.

- ✓ **St. Martin:** The waters off the northwestern coastal shores of French St. Martin have been classified as a regional underwater nature reserve and are government protected. With a fair amount of reef life to explore, the waters off the coast are known for their visibility. Our favorite spot for snorkeling is **Pine Island (Ilet Pine)**, lying just off the northern coast and reached by any number of boats. This uninhabited island also boasts one of the best beaches in the area. Between snorkeling adventures, you can enjoy food and drink at two beach bars. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Buck Island (St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands):** Our favorite snorkeling spot in all the Caribbean is the offshore 121-hectare (300-acre) Buck Island Reef, a volcanic islet enveloping 223 hectares (550 acres) of underwater coral gardens. This islet boasts one of the best underwater snorkeling trails in all the West Indies, and the government has protected it ever since President Kennedy declared it a national treasure. Boat departures for this piece of underwater enchantment are from Kings Wharf in Christiansted, St. Croix. See Chapter 17 for boatmen who'll take you here.
- ✓ **Trunk Bay (St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands):** The biggest attraction on the small island of St. John is the idyllic beach of Trunk Bay. Sure, it's overcrowded, especially when cruise ships are in port, but it's one of the loveliest beaches in the West Indies. You can rent snorkeling gear here and follow an underwater trail of stunning beauty. The self-guided tour stretches 205m (672 ft.), and underwater signs identify species of coral and other items of marine life. See Chapter 17.

## The Best Sailing

- ✓ **British Virgin Islands:** Rivalled only by the Grenadines (part of St. Vincent), this is the greatest sailing mecca in the Caribbean, attracting yachties from around the world. No place in the West Indies has better marina and shore facilities than the two main islands, Tortola and Virgin Gorda. Tortola, incidentally, is the number-one charter-boat headquarters in the Caribbean Basin. The marvelous attraction of the archipelago of the British Virgins is that you can sail from island to island in just a short time, perhaps landing for a picnic on Norman Island, said to be the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Grand Cayman:** We'd hardly call it sailing, but Grand Cayman offers a different type of high-seas adventure. The 80-ton *Atlantis XI* is a submersible 20m-long (65-ft.) ship that carries 48 passengers into the murky depths of the ocean. On the vessel, you experience a close encounter with tropical fish and other sea denizens that you miss when sailing the waves. You go to a depth of 30m (100 ft.), exploring a world known only to scuba divers. The *Seaworld Explorer* is also a semisubmarine that plunges into the sea. We explore both of these options in Chapter 12.

- ✔ **Puerto Rico:** Although this island Commonwealth of the U.S. isn't the sailor's dream that the British Islands are, boaters still consider it a haven. The best port for embarkations is **Fajardo**, along the East Coast, where you have unlimited sailing possibilities. You can sail over to Puerto Rico's two major offshore islands, Vieques and Culebra, or go to more unspoiled cays such as Icacos or Palimino, lying only an hour or two away. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands:** St. Thomas is the charter-boat headquarters of the U.S. Virgin Islands, occupying the same position that Tortola holds for the BVIs. This place is an ideal embarkation point because so many islands lie close to St. Thomas, including the BVIs. You can sail aboard an estimated 100 vessels, which are rented out to qualified sailors — sail on your own or book a crew through a charter outfit. Many boat lovers sign up for a seven-day sail that takes in the highlights of both the British and U.S. Virgin Islands. See Chapter 17.

## *The Best Golf Courses*

- ✔ **Tierra del Sol (Aruba):** One of the top golf courses in the southern Caribbean, this 18-hole, par-71, 6,198m (6,776-yard) course was designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr. It combines lush greens with the beauty of the island's indigenous flora, such as the windblown divi-divi tree. The location is near the California Lighthouse, and the Northwest Coast setting is one of natural but rugged beauty, taking in a saltwater marsh inhabited by egrets, odd rock formations, and a bird sanctuary whose inhabitants include the rare burrowing owl. See Chapter 9.
- ✔ **The Royal Westmoreland Golf and Country Club (Barbados):** This \$30-million, 18-hole golf course is the premier links of Barbados. Designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr., the course is spread across 200 landscaped hectares (500 acres), overlooking the **Gold Coast** on the western coastline of the island. To play, you have to be a guest of one of the swanky properties along the coast. Open to all and also a championship golf area is the 18-hole course of the **Sandy Lane Hotel**, also on the West Coast. Golfers can play on "The Old Nine" or on two 18-hole championship courses, each designed by famous golf architect Tom Fazio. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Brittania Golf Club (Grand Cayman):** The course, the first of its kind in the world, was designed by Jack Nicklaus. It incorporates three different courses in one: a 9-hole championship layout, an 18-hole executive setup, and an 18-hole Cayman course. The last was designed for play with the Cayman ball, which goes about half the distance of a regulation ball. The course lies next to the luxurious Hyatt Regency on Seven Mile Beach. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Tryall Golf, Tennis, and Beach Club (Montego Bay, Jamaica):** Lying 24km (15 miles) west of Montego Bay, this 18-hole championship

course is laid out on the grounds of a 19th-century sugar plantation. It gained world fame as the site of the annual Johnnie Walker World Championship. The par-71 course exults in its 6,108m (6,678 yards) of hills and dales. The course is known for constantly changing wind directions. See Chapter 13.

- ✔ **Rose Hall Resort & Country Club (Montego Bay, Jamaica):** Lying 6.4km (4 miles) east of the airport at Montego Bay, Rose Hall has a challenging 18-hole golf course with a backdrop of both the ocean and the mountains. It's a par-71, 6,033m (6,596-yard) course, with an eighth hole that skirts the water. The 15th green is next to a 12m (40-ft.) waterfall once featured in a James Bond movie. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Carambola Golf Course (St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands):** On the northeast side of the island, this 6,257m (6,843-yard) 18-hole course was created by Robert Trent Jones, Sr., who called it "the loveliest course I ever designed." The par-three holes here are known to golfers as the best in the tropics, and the course has been compared to a botanical garden. See Chapter 17.

## The Best Tennis Facilities

- ✔ **Half Moon (Rose Hall, Montego Bay, Jamaica):** This sprawling resort boasts Jamaica's most extensive tennis complex, a total of 13 courts, 7 of which are lit for night play. Tennis players from all over the world are attracted to these courts, following a long-standing British-based affinity for the game. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Tryall Golf, Tennis, and Beach Club (Montego Bay, Jamaica):** Four on-site pros welcome you to these nine state-of-the-art, hard-surface courts, three of which are illuminated for night play. Lessons are also available. The deluxe resort lies 19km (12 miles) west of Montego Bay on the site of an 880-hectare (2,200-acre) former sugar plantation and maintains the aura of an elegant country estate. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Westin Rio Mar Beach Golf Resort & Spa (Puerto Rico):** This \$180-million resort on 195 landscaped hectares (481 acres), near the most popular beach on Puerto Rico, also boasts some of the northern Caribbean's best tennis facilities. It features a total of 13 championship tennis courts, which can be illuminated for night play. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **St. Lucia Racquet Club (St. Lucia):** The island's finest tennis courts, among the best in the Lesser Antilles, lie at the St. Lucia Racquet Club, adjacent to **Club St. Lucia**. Its seven illuminated courts are maintained in state-of-the-art condition; a top pro shop is on the grounds. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **The Buccaneer (St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands):** This resort is not only the top one on this U.S. Virgin Island, but it also features the

best tennis facilities on the island — in fact, the finest in all the U.S. Virgin Islands. The resort hosts several prestigious tournaments every year. Eight all-weather Laykold tennis courts, two of which are illuminated at night, plus a top-notch pro shop are on-site. See Chapter 17.

## *The Best Fishing*

- ✔ **Barbados:** Deep-sea fishing is the name of the game in Barbados. Sports fishermen set out to hunt for billfish, sailfish, and blue and white marlin, along with barracuda and kingfish. The fishing is first-rate in the waters around Barbados, where catches have also included dolphin fish (mahi-mahi) and such big game fish as wahoo; the occasional cobia may turn up on your line. Some highly skilled charter boat captains set out, usually carrying five to six fishermen. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **British Virgin Islands:** This archipelago lies at the center of some of the richest game-fishing channels on earth, notably the 80km (50-mile) **Puerto Rican Trench** near the sparsely inhabited island of Anegada. Fishermen have chalked up record catches in marlin, shark, bluefish, tuna, sailfish, and the big game wahoo. Bonefishing in the saltwater flats of the British Virgin Islands is also a popular sport. You can book excellent boat charters on the island. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Puerto Rico:** Some 30 world records have been racked up in the waters off the coast of Puerto Rico. The big catches here are white and blue marlin, dolphin fish (mahi-mahi), yellow and blackfin tuna, mackerel, tarpon, snook, Allison tuna, and wahoo, plus bonefish in the shallows. Puerto Rico's annual billfish tournament is the largest of its kind in the world. You can book some excellent boat charters. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands:** On this island, 19 fishing world records (8 of these for blue marlin) have been set in recent years. Blue marlin weighing 453kg (1,000 lbs.) have been caught in **North Drop** off the North Coast of the island. Big catches in wahoo, tuna, skipjack, sailfish, and dolphin fish (mahi-mahi) have also been chalked up. For charter-boat recommendations, flip to Chapter 17.

## *The Best Shopping*

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, those islands remain the shopping bazaar of the Caribbean. U.S. citizens may carry home \$1,200 worth of goods untaxed, as opposed to only \$400 worth of goods from most other islands in the Caribbean. (The only exception to this rule is Puerto Rico, where you can carry any purchase,

regardless of the amount, back to the U.S. mainland tax-free.) Although it isn't a U.S. possession, Sint Maarten/St. Martin, which France and the Netherlands rule jointly, gives the Virgins some serious shopping competition. The island is virtually a shopper's mall, especially on the Dutch side. The U.S. doesn't grant the generous Customs allowances on Sint Maarten/St. Martin that it does to its own islands, but the island doesn't charge duty, so you still can find some lovely bargains.

- ✓ **Aruba:** The wisest shoppers on Aruba are cost-conscious souls who've carefully checked the prices of comparable goods before leaving home. Duty is relatively low (only 3.3 percent). 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 9.
- ✓ **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, any buyer can haul off duty-free items as soon as he or she pays for them. 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 10.
- ✓ **Grand Cayman:** Goods are sold tax-free from a daunting collection of malls and minimalls throughout Grand Cayman. Most of these malls are along the highway that parallels the Seven Mile Beach; you need a car to shop around. You can also find 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 12.
- ✓ **Jamaica:** The shopping was better in the good old days, before new taxes added a 10 percent 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 sculptures, cameras, watches, and VCRs. 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 13.
- ✓ **Puerto Rico:** U.S. citizens don't have to pay duty on anything they buy on Puerto Rico. You're not guaranteed that prices will be particularly low, however. Jewelry and watches abound, 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 14.

- ✔ **Sint Maarten/St. Martin:** Because of the massive influx of cruise ships, shopping on Dutch Sint Maarten is now about the finest in the Caribbean, though you may have to fight the crowds. Because you don't have to pay duty, prices can be 30 to 50 percent 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**, the capital of the island's Dutch side, is the best place to shop. Although it can't compete with Dutch Sint Maarten, French St. Martin is becoming a more popular shopping destination, especially for fashion or perfumes imported from France. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands:** 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 elsewhere in the Caribbean. However, despite all the fanfare, real bargains are hard to come by. Look for two local publications, *This Week* and *Best Buys*; either may 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 17.
- ✔ **St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands:** 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 many special finds. Prices are about the same here as on St. Thomas. See Chapter 17.

## *The Best Nightlife*

- ✔ **Aruba:** This island has ten big, splashy casinos, each with its own unique décor 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. See Chapter 9.
- ✔ **Barbados:** Bridgetown is home to such boats as the **Jolly Roger**, which embarks at sundown for rum-and-reggae cruises, as well as oversize music bars like **M/V Harbour Master**. Otherwise, a host of bars, British-style pubs, dozens of restaurants, and discos (both within and outside large hotels) beckon from **St. Lawrence Gap** or the crowded Southwest Coast. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **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 you can hear at hotels, resorts, and raffish dives throughout the island. Hotels often stage folkloric shows that include entertainers who sing, dance, swallow torches, and walk on broken glass. You also find plenty of indoor/outdoor bars where you might actually be able to talk to people. Local tourist boards in Negril and Montego Bay sometimes organize weekly beach parties called *boonoonoonoos*. See Chapter 13.

- ✔ **Puerto Rico:** Puerto Rico contains all the raw ingredients for great nightlife, including casinos, endless rows of bars and *bodegas*, cabaret shows with girls and glitter, and discos 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 you can also find 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, shops) that can distract you from the tables. If you're a really serious partier, you'll have lots of company on Puerto Rico. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Sint 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. Discos are often indoor/outdoor affairs. Low-key hotel casinos abound on the Dutch side. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands:** The most active nightlife in all the Virgin Islands (U.S. or British) takes place on St. Thomas. 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 bars, restaurants, concerts, clubs, and folklore and reggae shows. See Chapter 17.