

Top Ten

Caribbean Islands for 2010

The Caribbean is eternally appealing, but now even more so with new nonstop flights, plum hotels springing up on emerging islands, and unheard-of bargains at pricey hideouts. From well-trodden sands to blissfully obscure isles, here are the top destinations to check out this year. BY ARABELLA BOWEN

A cottage on Petit St. Vincent, a private island in the Grenadines

NEIL SELKIRK/COURTESY PETIT ST. VINCENT

1 St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Before St. Vincent served as the setting for *Pirates of the Caribbean*, this remote island and the whole Grenadine chain was primarily known only to sailors and seclusion-seeking rock stars. Indeed, Mick Jagger and David Bowie discreetly frequent the exclusive Grenadine isle of Mustique. These days, however, the even prettier, quiet island of Bequia is on the rise, thanks to buzz about newcomer Firefly Plantation Bequia and the halfway complete Bequia Beach Hotel. Canouan Island already boasts a sprawling, superluxe Raffles resort that evokes the South Pacific (see p.78 for an exclusive offer). And lush St. Vincent is touching up its popular sights like the panoramic Belmont Lookout and the canopied Vermont Nature Trail. What's more, JetBlue's new non-stop flights to Barbados, the unofficial gateway to the Grenadines, makes them (somewhat) easier to reach.

VALUE Overlooking Bequia's spectacular Friendship Beach, the Bequia Beach Hotel has already opened two restaurants, a pool, six villas, and 25 colonial-style rooms and suites, many of them with handsome four-poster beds. *From \$180/night; bequiabeach.com*
SPLURGE On the private island of Petit St. Vincent, or PSV, Petit St. Vincent Resort has 22 stone-clad one-bedroom cottages, all blissfully unplugged. For every guest there are two friendly staff members. Request cottage No. 6 for utter solitude and an outdoor shower. *From \$1,020/night, all inclusive, through March 12; psvresort.com*

2 Curaçao

True, Curaçao has historically trailed its sister islands of Aruba and Bonaire when it comes to attracting vacationers, largely because oil refining and financial services, rather than tourism, dominate its prosperous economy. Yet clearly some repositioning is afoot: Four new resorts have opened here in the past year alone, including Renaissance and Hyatt Regency hotels; Lodge Kura Hulanda & Beach Club unveiled a tree house "mansion"; and the Avila Hotel introduced 68 more rooms. In November, American Airlines added a second daily flight to Curaçao from Miami. Before the secret gets out, go and explore its capital of Willemstad, where dozens of brightly colored Dutch colonial buildings comprise a UNESCO-protected district.

VALUE Newer hotels may have arrived, but Hotel Kura Hulanda Spa & Casino (not to be confused with its sister Beach Club property), whose 80 unique rooms are housed in historic Dutch colonial buildings, still offers the island's—if not the Caribbean's—most memorable overnight. *From \$125/night through April 3; kurahulanda.com*

SPLURGE The 350-room Hyatt Regency Curaçao Golf Resort, Spa and Marina, opening March 1 on a sand-trimmed natural preserve, will constitute the island's first full-scale beach resort. Expect an 18-hole Pete Dye-designed golf course, three pools, and a full spa. *From \$219/night until June 1; curacao.hyatt.com*

3 Jamaica

Those who've steered clear of Jamaica because of its spring break vibe should reconsider. Last fall, JetBlue, Delta, US Airways, and AirTran launched nonstop flights from various U.S. cities (including New York, Phoenix, Atlanta, Orlando, and Baltimore), making the island more accessible than ever. Book a cheap fare, ignore the captain's exhorter to "race to the beach!" and deplane to one of the island's distinctive boutique hotels. Island Outpost's legendary Goldeneye, Ian Fleming's onetime private estate, will reopen later this year with 11 new cottages and a beachfront restaurant. Several cool cliffside resorts in Negril provide a laid-back alternative to the Montego Bay fray further up the coast. And the oft-maligned city of Kingston is experiencing a makeover, centering on the aptly named New Kingston neighborhood northwest of the downtown. Here the capital's first new hotel in 40 years, the smart 107-room Spanish Court Hotel, opened in June with a hip rooftop bar.

VALUE Offering one of the best lodging deals in the Caribbean, Negril's Rockhouse presents 34 thatch-roofed units and a new spa in a terrific cliffside setting. *From \$160/night, rockhousehotel.com*
SPLURGE Check out Kingston's new scene from the plush vantage of Strawberry Hill, a 12-cottage compound run by Island Outpost on a former coffee plantation in the Blue Mountains beyond the capital. *From \$295/night through April 19; islandoutpost.com/strawberry_hill*

4 Grenada

This southern Caribbean island last made U.S. headlines in 1983 when Ronald Reagan ordered an invasion to quell a Marxist coup. Since then, mostly Brits have trod its 50-odd beaches, making it a great choice for American sunseekers who would rather not run into their neighbors on the sand. A nascent resort-spa crop is one reason to visit now; three luxe options have debuted here over the past two years. Other attractions include Grenada's capital, St. George's, which cascades down around a handsome port known as the Carenage, and the island's bustling markets, where one can purchase some of the dozen-plus domestically produced spices. The island is also home to the Caribbean's oldest waterwheel-powered distillery, River Antoine Rum Distillery, whose namesake Rivers Rum is a doozy 152-proof libation too flammable to bring home by plane.

VALUE Above-average gratis perks, like spa treatments, one-tank dives, and even archery and fencing lessons, come standard at adults-only LaSource, a 100-room resort on Pink Gin Beach. *From \$361/night per person, all inclusive, through April 8; theamazingholiday.com*

SPLURGE Boho-chic LaLuna has 16 large one- and two-bedroom cottages, each outfitted with a plunge pool. Guests can meander between beachfront yoga classes, an open-air lounge for watching sunsets, and a fab new Balinese spa. Its superb Italian restaurant is also a draw. *From \$775/night through April 9; laluna.com*



7 Anguilla

Exclusive Anguilla, with its powdery white-sand beaches, gourmet restaurants, and refined resorts and villas, has long been the quiet alternative to St. Barts. The last 12 months have brought the debut of the slick Viceroy Anguilla (the brand's first Caribbean outpost); a major makeover of stylish Cap Juluca; and the expansion of the spa at CuisinArt Resort & Spa. At the same time, the global recession has crimped the return of visitors to Anguilla's shores. The result? Off-season rates plummeted by more than 50 percent at some hotels, a trend expected to continue this year. For those who have their hearts set on high season (lasting until April), hotels are adding loads of perks (champagne at Viceroy, upgrades at Cap Juluca) in lieu of lowering rates.

VALUE It's all about location at Kú, an all-suite boutique hotel with a happening bar scene on Shoal Bay, one of Anguilla's best beaches. While the 27 shabby-chic rooms could use an upgrade, they're quite spacious, especially the top-floor quarters with pitched West Indian roofs. Request a room away from the bar to sleep in peace. *From \$315/night till April 4; ku-anguilla.com*
SPLURGE Along Rendezvous Bay, the 93-room all-white CuisinArt Resort and Spa, owned by the kitchen-gadget company of the same name, evokes a tropical Santorini. Highlights include the spa, two Mediterranean restaurants serving homegrown fare, and a delightful beach bar with frosty cucumber-and-sage martinis. *From \$740/night until April 3 (\$590/night with the five-night Winter Breaks special); cuisinartresort.com*



FROM TOP: The Estate House bar and restaurant at Antigua's Jumby Bay; a suite at the Viceroy Anguilla

5 Antigua

Versatile Antigua has a bit of everything: historic forts, picturesque harbors, 365 beaches, and several sumptuous hotels. Nearby lie the islands of Montserrat and Barbuda, ideal for day trips. Jumby Bay, on a 300-acre island 2 miles off the coast, happens to be one of the Caribbean's most reachable private-island resorts. The storied retreat is fresh off a revamp that yielded a new open-air spa, an oceanfront infinity pool, 40 redesigned guest rooms, and two fresh restaurants. Continental and American Airlines fly nonstop to Antigua from several East Coast cities, and a private catamaran deposits guests right at the resort's dock.

VALUE Notable newcomer hotel Sugar Ridge opened in late 2009 on a hillside overlooking Nevis and St. Kitts. Its 60 well-appointed rooms are furnished with seaview balconies and most have canopy beds. *From \$300/night through April 9 (see p.78 for an exclusive offer); sugarridgeantigua.com*

SPLURGE Jumby Bay's colonial-style rooms feature four-poster beds, wraparound terraces, private courtyards, and outdoor showers. Its new spa offers five private treatment rooms and dreamy massages in a hammock. *From \$1,395/night, all inclusive, through May 31; jumbybayresort.com*

6 British Virgin Islands

The pristine BVI has long attracted yachties and royalty to its turquoise waters, thanks to posh resorts like Rosewood Little Dix Bay, Sir Richard Branson's Necker Island, and Peter Island. This February, Branson is rolling out *Necker Belle*, a 105-foot, four-cabin catamaran available for charter. A three-person submersible is provided for an extra fee. Nearby, the private island resort Scrub Island is slated to open on April 2 after several delays. On Tortola, two notable villas recently became available for rental, which bring the pricey region into reach: U.S. politico Lester Hyman's art-bedecked, three-bedroom private estate, Arundel Villa, and the elegant three-bedroom Frenchman's Paradise.

VALUE The Frenchman's Paradise villa sleeps up to six people and features a gorgeous chef's kitchen, an open-air living room, and a pool with sweeping views. Visitors can add amenities, such as private spa services, à la carte. *From \$3,500 a week; frenchmanslookout.com*

SPLURGE The 100-room Rosewood Little Dix Bay opened in the 1960s on Virgin Gorda and its perfect strip of beach has hardly changed since. Look forward to spacious rooms (spring for the newer Rosewood Junior Suites), a cliffside spa, and three excellent restaurants. *From \$650/night; littledixbay.com*



8 St. Lucia

If recent happenings are any indicator, St. Lucia is poised to become the region's new culinary darling. Last year the hacienda-like Cap Maison welcomed award-winning chef Craig Jones, whose résumé includes stints at several British Relais & Châteaux hotels and St. Lucia's Royal Rex. Jalousie Plantation, which will be rebranded Tides Sugar Beach by the year's end, just tapped the chef at Tides Riviera Maya to helm its formal restaurant. Both The Landings and Jade Mountain recently added innovative agritours that allow guests to work on local farms and join fishing trips. In March, the British chocolatier Hotel Chocolat will open an eponymous six-room hotel on its 265-year-old working cocoa plantation. Thanks to a slew of nonstop flights from the U.S., weekend gourmants can sample the island's burgeoning table by lunchtime.

VALUE Coco Palm and its 83 casual West Indian-style rooms lie within walking distance of Reduit Beach and offer one of Rodney Bay's top lodging values. The best (and most expensive) "swim-up" suites have French doors that open right onto a pool. *From \$145/night till April 1; coco-resorts.com*

SPLURGE A decadent six-night Peak to Beach package combines three nights at the legendary Ladera Resort overlooking the Pitons and three nights in an oceanview villa at Cap Maison. *From \$6,000 a week for two, all inclusive, till March 31; capmaison.com*

9 Dominican Republic

In the last decade the Dominican Republic has probably built more resorts on its shores than any other Caribbean island, but not all of them are the mass-market, all-inclusive type that catapulted the island to sun-and-fun fame in recent years. A recent trove of small hotels is putting that reputation to rest, which is good news for U.S. beachgoers seeking a classy island escape close to home. The biggest rainmaker these days is the intimate Peninsula House that debuted two years ago on the Samaná Peninsula, a less-developed area known for its exquisite beaches and small fishing villages. This season its new neighbor is the Balcones del Atlántico, an all-suites RockResort property opening this February with a thatched-roof beach club perched over the sea. Further east, trailblazer Puntacana Resort & Club isn't idly standing by: This year it debuts two golf courses, including a Tom Fazio creation with six oceanfront holes.

VALUE The island's only Small Luxury Hotels of the World member, the 50-suite Casa Colonial Beach & Spa Resort near Puerto Plata, still impresses some six years after its launch. Book 15 days in advance to save as much as 40 percent. *From \$255/night through April 3; casacolonialhotel.com*

SPLURGE The family-owned, art-filled Peninsula House, set in a Victorian mansion high above the beach, offers just six junior suites and warm, impeccable service. *From \$520/night; thepeninsula.com*

10 Vieques, Puerto Rico

Since embracing tourism in 2003 after decades as a U.S. naval base, the tiny island of Vieques 6 miles off the southeastern coast of Puerto Rico has been the most accessible "uncharted territory" in the Caribbean. With Vieques harboring more than 40 miles of unspoiled sand and the Caribbean's largest wildlife refuge, its small hotels and casual restaurants have attracted easygoing, eco-minded tourists. Thus the W Retreat & Spa, Vieques Island due to launch this spring is sure to stir things up. This marks the urban brand's inaugural Caribbean foray. Secondly, the W will host Alain Ducasse's first Caribbean restaurant, Mix on the Beach, a major culinary coup for the W. So if you're the sort to despair of a place being "discovered," plan a last visit this winter, before the new regime arrives in May. Otherwise, be among the first to sleep in W's new digs and get a table at what may be the most gourmet beachside restaurant this side of St. Tropez.

VALUE One of the Caribbean's most architecturally arresting hotels, Hix Island House has 13 spare, solar-powered loftlike apartments, with kitchenettes, indoor-outdoor living spaces, and dramatic cutout vistas. *From \$195/night through April 30; hixislandhouse.com*

SPLURGE On the island's north coast, the 157-room W Retreat & Spa, Vieques Island is accepting reservations for dates after May 1. Set on two private beaches, the hotel will introduce boldly designed rooms (most with ocean views), a glitzy infinity pool, an outdoor fire pit, and an oceanfront spa. *From \$429/night till August 20; whotels.com*



FROM TOP: Verdant St. Lucia is known for its mountainous topography; a rendering of a guest room at the W Retreat & Spa on Vieques