

Green shoots

Discover a less-touristed side of Barbados on its wild and windswept east coast, writes **Nigel Tisdall**

The east coast of Barbados, viewed from Cherry Tree Hill

Visiting a quarry isn't the first thing you think of doing in Barbados. Yet when I arrive at Walkers Reserve, in the northeast of this popular Caribbean island, I'm astonished.

For more than four decades, this 277-acre site was a huge, privately owned sand mine. Now its stocks are exhausted and the enlightened owners are busy transforming this hilly coastal landscape into a verdant, family-friendly nature park with forests, lakes, orchards and an apiary.

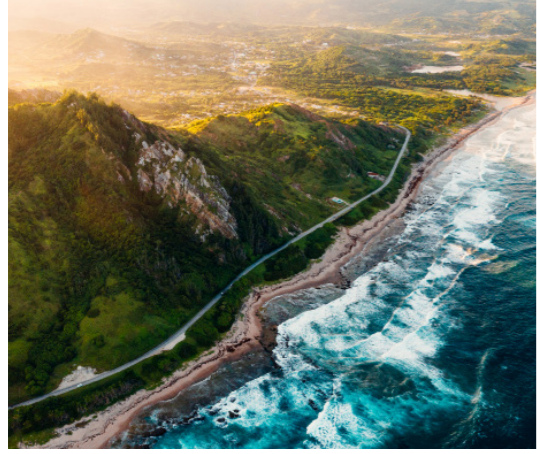
Already open for self-guided hikes, Walkers' star attraction is a mile-long beach that is all but deserted. While the sea is too rough for swimming (standard on Barbados's windswept east coast), you can enjoy an exhilarating walk and picnic with barely a soul around – and on this tiny island of densely packed resorts and daily traffic jams, that's a real treat.

Measuring just 12 by 14 miles and home to 281,000 Bajans, Barbados is the second most-densely populated island in the Caribbean, after Saint Martin. It lives on tourism and development seems unstoppable. A 380-room Hyatt resort is coming to Carlisle Bay and a 100-property estate is planned for Skeetes Bay.

Last October, the Wyndham Grand Barbados Sam Lord's Castle Resort soft-opened on the southeast coast. The government-owned, seven-storey property boasts 422 rooms, five pools and a ballroom. There is much to admire, including pared-down interiors, committed and knowledgeable staff, and all-inclusive rates that let guests sip premium Mount Gay rums until 1am. Only 15 minutes from the airport, it is proving popular with transiting cruise ship passengers, though clients should be aware that the property is fairly isolated and the beach not safe for swimming. ➤

DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | BARBADOS



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Walkers Reserve; Wyndham Grand Barbados Sam Lord's Castle Resort; Coco Hill Forest; Peg Farm & Nature Reserve



GREEN THINKING

Balancing the desire for progress with environmental concerns is never easy but sustainable initiatives are on the rise. It's good to see Sam Lord's Castle using responsibly sourced woods and locally made, plant-based water bottles.

Meanwhile, Apes Hill, a new golf resort in St James, spent two years creating a drought-resistant course that is watered by an independent, rain-fed reservoir and bordered with fruit trees, wildflowers and beehives. Farm-to-fork meals are served in its clubhouse, while produce from Walkers Reserve features on the seasonal menus at the acclaimed Local & Co restaurant in Speightstown.

Equally impressive is Peg Farm, a family-friendly biodynamic farm in Easy Hall, St Joseph. Its restaurant serves superb dishes such as coconut callaloo and pork shoulder cooked in molasses, all made using locally grown, free-range produce. Visitors can follow signed walks or book a four-hour guided tour to learn about its ecological principles, savour the fine views and meet its well-cared-

for pigs, cows and chickens. Prices from \$80 or \$55 for under-12s.

GET WALKING

For clients who like to stretch their legs, Barbados has plenty of options. One of the most manageable is the Barbados Trailway at The Valley in St George. This follows the route of an old railway line that once curled around the island, with a 2.4-mile stretch of paved bike and pedestrian path currently under construction.

Another rewarding experience is to join the free, three-hour guided walks on Sunday afternoons organised by the Barbados Hiking Association. Moving at a good lick, these circular yomps of eight miles or longer depart from a different point every week and include natural attractions such as Hackleton's Cliff and the remote sands at Cove Bay.

For something less strenuous, Coco Hill Forest is a 53-acre hillside property in St Joseph where Barbados-born film-maker Mahmood Patel is creating a leafy sanctuary for walkers. "A hike here is more about learning than

covering ground," he explains, with two miles of winding trails through dense forest to explore, which includes abundant ferns and a splendid cluster of 90-year-old royal palms rising 100ft high.

As I immerse myself in this sylvan paradise of rampant foliage, vivid blooms and flitting butterflies, it is hard to believe we are just a short drive from the intense strip of well-heeled resorts, luxury boutiques and seaside restaurants that hug the west coast. Barbados may have its challenges, but there are still many pockets of peace and natural beauty to be enjoyed. **TW**

BOOK IT

Aer Lingus flies from Manchester, from £498 return. aerlingus.com

Double rooms at **Wyndham Grand Barbados Sam Lord's Castle Resort** start from £420 all-inclusive. wyndhamhotels.com

Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc offers information and trade resources. visitbarbados.org

SELLING TIPS

✿ Barbados is the easternmost island in the Caribbean, so flight times can be as little as eight hours.

✿ Clients should complete an online customs and immigration form prior to arrival. travelform.gov.bb

✿ Due to demand, Aer Lingus has extended its three-times-a-week service from Manchester until May 31.

✿ Grantley Adams International Airport is undergoing expansion, including a new terminal building with bigger capacity and improved amenities.

✿ Ocean Hotels will unveil The Rockley, a 49-suite beach resort in Christ Church, in February, with B&B rates from £214. oceanhotelsbarbados.com

✿ The five-star Blue Monkey Hotel and Beach Club, helmed by ex-Sandy Lane manager Randall Wilkie, is due to open on Paynes Beach next winter with 28 luxury suites. bluemonkeybarbados.com



PICTURE: Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc/13 Degrees North Productions