

# Time to join the party people

It's famous for its exclusive hideaways, pleasure-filled nights and leisurely days. **Justine Vergeld** looks at Barbados's expanding appeal

On a Caribbean island famed for providing leisure and pleasure, almost everyone seems to be hard at work. After last year's celebrations marking 40 years of independence, followed by December's successful staging of the Golf World Cup, Barbados is today busy putting the finishing touches to the biggest event since independence itself: the Cricket World Cup.

The global sports fest will again focus the world's attention on a small nation with big ambitions: to rank among the world's top 'developed' countries by 2020, to take the lead in the CARICOM Single Market and Economy launching

next year and, crucially for its economy, to develop its resources as a gateway for the region's burgeoning tourist industry.

Known for its palm-fringed sweeping beaches and sunny climate (3,500 hours of sun annually), Barbados has become a prime tourism destination in the Caribbean Sea. The Barbados Tourism Authority (BTA), which markets the island overseas, positions Barbados as a premier, globally competitive, year-round warm-weather destination with world-class standards.

Celebrity visitors have given the island a certain iconic appeal (it's become one of the destinations of choice for family Blair over the past three years), especially in the UK, from which it achieved independence in 1966 and to which it remains linked by hundreds of years of economic and cultural history. Forty per cent of the tourist trade stems from the UK, and there are also an increasing number of British residents looking to retire in its tropical climes, investing in condominiums, villas and pieds-a-terre. Around 40,000 people from the UK now live in Barbados.

With the Cricket World Cup and other attractions on offer, the BTA is expecting an extra 600,000 visitors this year and,

emphasising a long-term commitment to sustainable development, the island attracts grand hotel names such as the recently established Hilton and over 100 restaurants, ranging from gourmet establishments to roadside hostleries offering local dishes.

And Barbados is looking well beyond this year's cricket tournament, with a target for tourist accommodation to reach 9,500 rooms by 2010. From a population of 227,000, 8.5 per cent work in tourism and this is set to increase to 10.6 per cent by 2012. The contribution of tourism to the Barbadian economy is set to touch 50 per cent within five years.

Flight times from the UK to the Sir Grantley Adams International Airport are around eight hours. The airport receives daily flights by several major airlines from points around the globe, as well as several smaller regional commercial airlines and charters. It serves as the main air transportation hub for the Eastern Caribbean, and is undergoing a \$100m upgrade and expansion. Barbados is also a prime cruise ship destination, with mega-veasels from Carnival, Caribbean and Disney Cruises mooring at Bridgetown.

Barbados's cruising credentials are being boosted by the construction of a new £12m cruise pier, overseen by Barbados Port Inc (BPI), with capacity for two giant cruise liners. The expansion means passenger arrivals could rise to a million a year, with parallel on-shore developments in terms of visitor facilities and amenities. It will also allow the



Cricket forms a major part of the Bajan experience, with beach games a regular sight. Photograph by Jason O'Brien/Action Images

port to continue separating its cruise and cargo handling operations in the interests of passenger safety.

Minister of Tourism and International Transport Noel Lynch believes that this enhancement of the country's port facilities will firmly establish Barbados as 'a premier destination for cruise business in the region'. During the Cricket World Cup, 13 ships will dock at Bridgetown, accommodating hundreds of cricket package tourists. The cruises are popular with families, and tie in with BTA ini-

tatives to attract more family tourism. The official 'Barbados Summer Sports Camp', which opens in July, will offer free football and cricket coaching to children spending their vacation on the island. Barbados has negotiated to sign up world-famous football and cricket stars to coach the camps, offering a real incentive to parent's planning a summer Caribbean holiday. Tennis and golf coaching are also available.

The island is also increasingly used as a wedding and honeymoon destination.

runners-up from each will advance to the Super 8 stage of the tournament, in which teams will play each of the other teams advancing, except the team from their opening group – another six games each.

The tournament will reach its climax on Saturday 28 April, when the two

**'They've done a wonderful job here. It's a wonderful thing to see what has transpired'**

semifinal winners meet at Kensington Oval in Barbados to contest the ninth ICC Cricket World Cup Final. Barbados will stage seven of the tournament's 51 matches: the final plus six matches in the Super 8 League, which will include three of the six most competitive matches played at this stage of the competition.

A whole range of events has been planned to complement the cricket fest in March and April. The island's cultural organisations, communities, businesses and individuals have come together in order to showcase the island's creative character, featuring visual arts, theatre, film, music – from classical to calypso – street parties, lectures, exhibitions, horse racing and other sports. On and off the pitch, it will be one big Bajan party.

Opening rounds will feature 16 teams divided into four groups of four. In each of these groups six matches will be played over the course of 11 days. The winners and

Bajan star Collis King helped power the West Indies to World Cup victory in 1979. Getty

## FESTIVAL SPIRIT

Dubbed 24-hour party people, Barbadians pride themselves on their ability to enjoy life to the full, and the internationally popular Crop Over festival, which runs over five weeks in the summer, is one example of the nation's joie de vivre. Celebrations include calypso concerts, events for children, exhibitions and a grand carnival finale.

Music lovers have plenty to enjoy: every March the Holders House festival brings together the cream of composers, directors and performers in a plantation setting – this year's offerings include Mozart operas performed by the New York Metropolitan, a glittering showcase of Broadway songs with Sir Tim Rice, and a satire of Hollywood by The Reduced Shakespeare Company. And the Barbados Jazz Festival showcases local and international virtuosos every January.

The National Independence Festival of Creative Arts encourages Barbadians to match their talents in the fields of music, singing, dance, drama, writing, fine art, photography and arts and crafts, throughout November, while the Hometown Festival commemorates the anniversary of the first settlement of Barbados in February 1627. The week-long festival begins in mid-February.

And for something a little different the Oistins Fish Festival, held in March, entices visitors to this south coast village, with Bajan fishcakes and fried fish among the traditional cuisines on offer to a background of calypso and reggae.

Bringing substantial revenue for the leisure industry, the tourism board carries out extensive promotion for this sector, highlighting the great choice of hotels, wedding planners and the ease of obtaining wedding licences, with no waiting period or minimum length of stay.

Lynch says: 'Barbados will never be able to compete against the mass tourist markets. What you need to be able to do is find the person who is willing to have a little more in terms of exclusivity and their vacation experience and who has

the money to spend. By adopting world-class standards we are setting ourselves apart from the crowd.'

Tourism Authority president Stuart Layne adds: 'Because we are discreet, anyone can come here and feel they are truly on holiday. We do not get impressed or intimidated by how well-known a person is or by what he or she does – they are simply guests of ours, and in the true Barbadian way we want to ensure they have a memorable experience. That goes for each and every one of our visitors.'

# Never mind the sugar – new prospects are even sweeter

Regional integration is just one factor speeding economic modernisation. By **Ian Rich**

THE CROSS-BORDER co-operation within the West Indies driven by the Cricket World Cup will provide a useful pointer towards progress toward the region's proposed economic integration. Barbados's Prime Minister Owen Arthur is spearheading the push towards a single market that it is hoped will usher in a 15-strong union ready to take on the competition of a globalised economy. The way the West Indies works its World Cup magic could be a perfect precursor to how the CARICOM (Caribbean Community) states may make history with an EU-style trade bloc.

A special visa issued to facilitate spectators shuttling freely between the 10 hosting nations treats the territories as a 'single domestic state'. The four-month arrangement will test CARICOM's carefully constructed co-operation framework for the first time. On offer is the free movement of professionals and goods between member nations, which also includes mainland Suriname and Belize.

Future proposals are geared towards a possible political integration, as well as airline amalgamation, regionalised stock exchange and a currency union, which Central Bank of Barbados governor Dr Marion Wilson believes is essential and achievable, though a narrowing of the differential between the region's interest and exchange rates will have to be accelerated if the 2010 deadline is to be met.

Whatever the rate of progress, Barbados is strongly positioned to be a regional business beacon. Having

enjoyed steady growth over the last four decades, it has held a leading position among developing countries on standards of living, education and housing, and seems set to achieve its ambition of being a 'developed' country within 15 years or so.

Banking is already big business. The Central Bank continues to improve the legislative apparatus to accommodate global regulations, with one recent move being the creation of a financial services commission.

Barbados, officials say, is not a 'tax haven', but a low-tax jurisdiction that simply seeks to make arrangements through a network of double taxation agreements and bilateral investment treaties. Safety from criminal practices is paramount. By the end of 2005, the Barbados stock exchange had capitalisation of around £11bn.

The insurance and reinsurance



Rum is a major export for Barbados.

sectors are also well represented. In a push to embrace high technology as a sustainable form of income, Barbados has also become a suitable place in which to base e-commerce services for retail or wholesale distribution. Though now overtaken as an income generator by tourism, international business has developed and continues to grow, encouraging financial and information service providers to establish companies on the island.

The richness of existing leisure resorts on the island is coupled with a fast developing real estate sector. The 500-acre Apes Hill Golf Club and Resort is one of the most prestigious current developments. At an estimated cost of £200m, the completed project will constitute the single largest investment of its kind in Barbados. The 160 lots with over 130 residences are already being snapped by wealthy Trinidadians, Americans and Britons, and the five-star hotel will complement what looks set to become one of the most magnificent golfcourses in the world. A £155m development on the old Paradise Beach resort site is also under way.

The economy has moved on from its historic dependence on sugar cane, though traditional sugar production and the niche market development of high-grade sugar brands (as well as a healthy export of world-leading rum brands) continues. However, to combat the increase in oil and gas prices the island is exploring innovative ways in which to utilise natural resources for energy and fuel.

There is also an emphasis on developing technology to harness wind power and transform unused sugarcane into biofuel. It all adds up to more and cleaner power for the economy.

# World Cup will see Bajans do what they do best

In staging the Cricket World Cup Final, Barbados has the chance to show off on two fronts – as hosts, and as sportsmen. **Angela Mudie** celebrates their long-time mastery of the game

CRICKET HERO Sir Everton Weekes sits proud and misty-eyed alongside a panel of his Bajan sporting peers at the official opening of the refurbished – more like transformed – Kensington Oval in the capital Bridgetown.

He's 82 years old, was born barely 100 yards from the stadium and remembers when cricket there was played on what amounted to little more than an open patch of grass. 'They have done a wonderful job. I still feel I belong here,' he says. 'It's a wonderful feeling to see what has transpired.'

And what has transpired is a £23m

redevelopment of the ground that will make it a fitting place to stage the final of the 2007 Cricket World Cup on 28 April. The ground's capacity has been enlarged from 15,000 to 28,000 and the newly installed communications centre will enable pictures of the tournament's final to be beamed around the world: an estimated global audience of two million is expected for the Cup's 51, One-Day International matches played over 47 days.

It's not the only commitment made to improving the local infrastructure in preparation for the Cup: a £30m expan-

sion of Bridgetown's ABC Highway, complete with new flyovers, newly constructed hotels and new berths in the port for luxury liners that will house package-class cricket fans are among the logistical challenges faced by planners and builders.

They were challenges accepted with gusto and pride. Cricket has always played a significant role in the social and spiritual development of the island, and the outstanding success of the many, great Barbadian cricket players has had a profoundly positive effect on the country's psyche.

The official announcement that the West Indies won the 2007 World Cup would be played in the West Indies, and that Barbados had been awarded the honour of hosting the final, was inevitably greeted with enormous excitement and an outpouring of national pride. The World Cup Final has only ever been hosted by five cities – London, Calcutta, Mel-

bourne, Lahore and Johannesburg. By awarding Bridgetown the rights to host the World Cup Final, the ICC instantly added further endorsement to the credo that, even though Barbados may be a small island, the country can still offer world-class facilities and services in a beautiful, peaceful environment.

Certainly staging the Cup presents problems and required cash, but it also offers Barbados a golden opportunity to showcase to the world two of its greatest skills – playing cricket and being the most excellent of hosts.

The first ever Cricket World Cup Final was played in 1975, and the West Indies won that inaugural event by defeating Australia, largely due to a spectacular century from the then captain Clive Lloyd. His team returned four years later in 1979 to take the second Cricket World Cup, this time by emphatically beating England on their home ground in the final. Victory on that occasion was ensured by a brilliant unbeaten 138 from Vivian Richards, a blistering innings of 86 runs off 66 balls by Barbadian Collis King and a devastating performance from another Barbadian, fast bowler Joel Garner, with an incredible spell where he took five wickets in eleven balls. Brian Lara is the current world record holder for both the highest Test score (401 not out) and the highest first class score (501 not out).

For the World Cup in 2007, matches will be played at eight venues: Antigua, Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts & Nevis, St Lucia and Trinidad & Tobago. The first match of the tournament will take place between the West Indies and Pakistan on Tuesday 13 March at the newly renovated Sabina Park in Kingston, Jamaica.

Opening rounds will feature 16 teams divided into four groups of four. In each of these groups six matches will be played over the course of 11 days. The winners and

Bajan star Collis King helped power the West Indies to World Cup victory in 1979. Getty



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