

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*