

# *Authentic* Islands

*Headed for the sun, surf, and sand? Don't settle for a generic island vacation. By Jeff Book*

**I***f you're off to the Caribbean or the Bahamas for a much-needed holiday, consider an experience beyond the norm. Sure, there are great resorts, tourist shops, and restaurants. But if you can truthfully say, "I could be doing this on any Caribbean island," it might be time to push the envelope. The islands offer a great diversity — in people, culture, geography, and cuisine. Discover what makes every patch of paradise unique and take a closer look at these authentic island excursions. ➔*

PHOTO BY ANDY ANDERSON



Caribbean fish balls with grated coconut



## St. John

➤ The smallest and greenest of the U.S. Virgin Islands (60 percent of it is preserved as a National Park), St. John is accessible only by ferry. It pioneered ecotourism in 1976, well before it was fashionable, with low-impact lodging such as Maho Bay Camps and Concordia Eco-Resort (think solar-powered tent-cottages). Yet it also offers (unfussy) luxury at resorts such as Caneel Bay and a variety of shops and restaurants in the port town of Cruz Bay. St. John earns kudos for the many ways visitors can enjoy its biggest draw, the pristine Caribbean environment — from diving at shipwreck sites to horseback riding on the beach to biking and hiking trails that wind past the remains of old sugar mills.



## Harbour Island

This Bahamas gem offers an irresistible mix of sleepy charm and cosmopolitan flair along with

popular activities like biking, fishing, and snorkeling. In the pastel-hued colonial village of Dunmore Town (laid out by Lord Dunmore in 1791), you can still buy fish off the dock and mingle with locals. Close by are well-preserved old sea captains' homes, handsome church-

## Jamaica

➤ Jamaica's name comes from *xaymaca*, an Arawak word meaning "land of wood and water," so naturally it offers freshwater fun. This is the premier place in the West Indies to float down a jungle river, drifting on a long bamboo raft (the way farmers once took their sugarcane and bananas to market) on the Rio Grande, Martha Brae, or White rivers. On the raft, you lounge in the middle while your pole-wielding pilot stands at the front. His lilting accent and the sun-dappled, slow-moving water have a powerfully soothing effect. After this go-with-the-flow outing, change your pace with a visit to lovely Dunn's River Falls, near Ocho Rios. There you can join others clambering up the cascade and let the falls wash over you for a refreshing hydro-massage.

es, and inviting inns (no wonder this is known as the Nantucket of the Caribbean). Even if you stay at one of the low-key, high-end resorts, you'll want to spend time strolling around the town. Enjoy the view of the harbor and Governor's Dock over a mai tai at The Landing. Kick up your heels on the sand dance floor at Gusty's. And then kick back on fabled, three-mile-long Pink Sands Beach — a heavenly spot for watching the sun rise and the sea regain its turquoise shimmer.

## San Juan

Puerto Rico's 500-year-old capital blends a bit of Havana with a little of Honolulu. It boasts Spanish colonial architecture, zesty restaurants, and rhythm-driven nightclubs, all minutes away from lush tropical rain forest. There are trendier areas, but none more charming than Old San Juan, with its historic, color-washed buildings, cobblestone streets, and oceanfront ramparts. The monumental forts that once guarded the Spanish port draw crowds of kids, who love to explore the turrets and tunnels and pretend to fire the cannons at pirate ships (which used to happen). A broad



## Turks and Caicos

➤ The Turks and Caicos are home to the Turk's head cactus (named for its fez-like crown) and rock iguanas. Don't let the large lizards frighten you — they're shy, harmless, and endangered. That's why they have their own reptile resort, uninhabited Little Water Cay, a 150-acre refuge with boardwalk trails for unobtrusive observation. You can visit the iguana isle as part of a snorkeling or sightseeing excursion, easy to arrange on Providenciales, or "Provo," the most developed island in this cluster. Keep an eye out for ospreys, flamingos, and JoJo, a friendly dolphin who's been declared a national treasure. Looking for some much larger critters? You can spot humpback whales near Salt Cay as they migrate down the Columbus Passage from January through March.

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: BON APPETIT / ALAMY; GEORGE H. H. HUEY/CORBIS; CATHERINE KANONW/CORBIS; DAVID CUMMING/EVE UNIQUITOUS/CORBIS



## Dominican Republic

For an authentic souvenir, look for jewelry mined from the island — honey-colored amber (fossilized resin from prehistoric trees) and larimar (a rare blue mineral found only here). A reliable source for both is Ambar Nacional, a jewelry store in Santo Domingo. Note: Generally the more intense the blue, the more valuable the larimar. And real amber floats in salt water; fake amber, made of plastic, doesn't. Amber can preserve organisms from millions of years ago, and Dominican amber, known for its transparency, has revealed scientifically valuable specimens from a long-vanished tropical ecosystem. Take a trip back in time at the Amber World Museum in Santo Domingo.

green esplanade is popular with picnickers and kite-flyers. To start the day right, head to century-old La Bombonera and indulge in pastries and island-grown coffee brewed in an antique Cuban coffee-maker. The quarter's lively dining scene offers tapas, ceviche, Nuevo Latino, and more. After dinner, follow your ears to nightclubs like Nuyorican Cafe for salsa and Latin jazz.

### St. Lucia

Every Friday night the town of Gros Islet throws a "jump-up" that's been called the best block party in the Caribbean. Vendors sell crafts, clothes, food, and drink to the friendly, largely local crowd. Nosh on grilled fish or chicken with an icy Piton beer or rum punch. From around nine o'clock to midnight people dance to soca (soul calypso) and other infectious tunes, played through massive outdoor speakers. On a good night the throng pulsates and dances into the wee hours. The St. Lucians are happy to share their joie de vivre with mainlanders.

### St. Martin/ St. Maarten

To paraphrase that old New York saying, St. Martin/St. Maarten is so nice they named it twice. Where else can you sample two European nations on one small Caribbean plot? The French and Dutch divided it in 1648 in the Treaty of Concordia, leaving us a bicultural playground. Rent a car or motorbike and quickly cover the whole island (a mere 34 square miles). With a population of

75,000 and a million visitors a year, this petite isle supports a wealth of eateries, making it one of the Caribbean's top culinary hot spots. The French

## Nevis

Take the ferry to Nevis from its sister island, St. Kitts, and you may think you've gone back in time. Small, verdant Nevis has no stoplights or high-rise hotels. Almost anywhere you'd want to go is on the road that loops around the island. Just outside Charlestown lie the ruins of the Caribbean's first resort, opened in the late 1700s — the Bath Hotel and Spring House. While that colonial spa is no more, you can still enjoy historic inns on old sugar plantations. Among them: Montpelier Plantation, Hermitage Plantation Inn, Golden Rock Inn, and Nisbet Plantation Beach Club. On Nevis, even the newest resort, the Four Seasons, is designed to blend into the natural setting. Drive around the island, stopping to stay or dine at the plantation inns, and you'll find echoes of a distant past in antique furnishings and the stone remnants of sugar mills. While you're at it, snorkel around offshore reefs, find solitude on a white-sand beach, or hike on a rain forest trail as monkeys chatter overhead. After Nevis, most other islands seem overdeveloped.



Hermitage Plantation Inn on Nevis

side is known for its restaurants, fashion outlets, and nude beaches. The Dutch side celebrates nightlife, casinos, and duty-free shopping (recall-

ing when the Dutch were world-class merchants). But you'll find wonderful beaches, first-rate cuisine, and festive socializing under both flags.

## St. Barts

The St. Tropez of the Western Hemisphere, St. Barts displays all the glamour of celebrities at play, chic villas and hotels, and designer boutiques. With outposts of Hermès, Longchamp, and the like, this is the Caribbean capital of high-style shopping. Like everything else on the island, restaurants are expensive but (thanks to the French influence) worth it. For a change of pace from the luxe attitude, head for Wishing Well, aka Chez Rolande, where twinkling lights and plastic tablecloths accompany authentic (and affordable) island fare. Sit outside in the shade of an almond tree, sip an aperitif, and contemplate the menu, which includes delectable conch fritters, fresh fish in Creole sauce, and savory goat stew. Bon appétit!



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