

Bajan beat

Sparkling coastlines, calypso tunes and a countryside paved with natural beauty... Barbados has charm by the bucketload, as **Jane Anderson** discovers

It's Friday night and the party is getting started at the Fish Fry at Oistins, a bustling fishing town on the south coast of Barbados. The fried flying fish is served to calypso beats, while dignified elders waltz along the seafront alongside boisterous teenagers. Come Saturday, the party moves south to St Lawrence Gap, or 'The Gap'. And for those with energy left, Sunday night is Ragamuffins (ragamuffinsbarbados.com) in Holetown for seafood and steaks, served up with cabaret, karaoke and rum punch. Welcome to the weekend in Barbados.

Tucked into the southern corner of the Lesser Antilles, Barbados is the easternmost island in the Caribbean. The west coast is its famous side: powdery beaches, water as clear as if poured from a tap, manicured estates, really manicured resorts and even more manicured golf courses. While the eastern coast of Barbados is a whole other world. Sequestered by acres of sugar-cane fields, thick forests and trees with wild green monkeys, this is the island's rougher side. Barbados may be just 34km x 23km but it crams a lot in that space and, judging from my first weekend here, what it lacks in size, it makes up for in energy and the Bajan appetite for life.

In fact, the food is one of the things that has drawn me here. Among the old-school charm of the island from its English, Africa, and West Indian history, Barbados is rediscovering its indigenuity. And nowhere is this more apparent than in its cuisine. It is the only Caribbean island to have its own Zagat guide and, on the west coast, you could eat well, albeit at London prices, at a different restaurant every night. The Cliff (thecliffbarbados.com) and Daphne's (daphnesbarbados.com) are two of the best.

However, I'm heading to the east coast and the seaside restaurant at the new Atlantis Hotel (atlantishotelbarbados.com), an elegant historic property dating back to the 1800s, located in the quaint fishing village of Tent Bay, St Joseph, and overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. After freshening up with a cooling coconut water, I study the menu: buljol and bake (a saltfish otherwise known as Caribbean sushi), fried flying fish, fresh catch of the day filleted on a stone slab just outside the hotel and pickled green banana salad. And it's the great food that is attracting lots of Bajans too. A sign in the restaurant reads, 'When I grow weary, I go to the sea.' I'll second that. This is one of the most exhilarating spots I have visited.

Their pepperpot stew whets my appetite and I head back to the west coast in search of more Bajan cooking. An all-inclusive resort might be the last place you would expect to find stunning local food, but Almond Beach Village (almondresorts.com) in Holetown offers just that. The resort epitomises everything that is Caribbean – and nowhere more than in their menus, which are peppered with local dishes.

