

But eating the food isn't enough. I need the recipes and for those I head to Enid's restaurant. Enid's is an institution loved by locals and tourists that not only serves great food but also holds regular cooking classes, which I sign up for immediately. My fellow students and I spend the afternoon enthusiastically learning the secrets of preparing fried flying fish (it's all in the boning) and being taught how to make cou-cou (a tasty mush of cornmeal and okra) and, of course, tasting plenty of dishes before we call it a day and head next door to Tommy's Rum Shop to try 'hard Coke' (a mixture of the island's renowned Mount Gay rum and cola).

Just south of Holetown is the world famous Sandy Lane hotel, where Michael Winner, Simon Cowell, the Beckhams, Hugh Grant (I could go on) are all regulars. This part of the island is known as the Platinum Coast, so named for the colour of its >

sparkling coastline and its preferred credit cards. Up the coast in Speightstown, one of the buzziest spots in town is run by art gallery owner, Roger Chubb. The Old Pharmacy Gallery (theoldpharmacy.com) and its adjoining Art Barn on Queen Street are working art studios, but it's the movie nights at his new Star Bar opposite, that make it the place to be. I join the crowds and pitch up with a picnic to watch old classics in the tropical evening breeze.

On the way back to my hotel that night, a local cabbie tells me 30 per cent of Bajans can't swim and many never go to the beach. So the next day I set off resolved to pick up the slack. The Platinum Coast is fringed by bays and coves, crystal water and powdery-white sandy beaches, and the best way to experience it is to get out onto the water. I take a Cool Runnings catamaran cruise (coolrunningsbarbados.com) from Bridgetown. I'm welcomed aboard by the captain, who calls me 'sweetie' in a fabulous Bajan lilt, and apart from arousing suspicious looks from the crew when I decline a rum punch (in my defence it is first thing in the morning), it's a perfect day. I sunbathe, snorkel with the sea turtles and stroll on the beaches. The Bajan water police even swing by on their Jet skis, more to pose than patrol.

If you're a surfer – or would like to be – Barbados is a paradise that is off the radar of all but the most devoted. On a map, Barbados looks as if it is drifting out into the open Atlantic, which makes it the perfect surf destination. A wave can travel nearly 3,000 miles in the open ocean, undisturbed by sandbars, reefs or land, before it breaks here. I hook up with Melanie Pitcher, a surfing instructor and owner of Barbados Surf Trips (surfbarbados.com) for a morning of lessons, but stick to the beginner's waves on the west coast. It's the east coast that is really the surfer's dream since it generally has waves 350 days a year.

And later that day, we head over there, to spectate. It's here that you will see the kind of scene you'd expect on the north shore of Oahu or the Gold Coast of Australia: surfers bobbing in the water as a 15ft swell rolls in. One of them snaps to his feet

and suddenly he is riding it – millions of gallons of the ocean's energy barreling him forward. It's exhilarating, just watching. Melanie explains that the real celebrity in town is Soup Bowl at Bathsheba, the main town on the east coast. It's the island's biggest wave. 'Soup Bowl gives you goosebumps,' Melanie says. 'When it's breaking clean, people come here after work and stand on the beach to watch. It's pure magic.' And Melanie's not the only fan: world surf champion Kelly Slater declared it one of the top three waves in the world.

Heading inland, the Bajans have made a great effort to show off previously hidden aspects of the island. The Aerial Trek Zipline Adventure (aerialtrek.com) at Jack-in-the-Box Gully has

brehtaking views down to the coast. As well as a zipline, the experience offers an eco trail that takes in one of the island's best secrets: its complex cave system. This adventure is as much about taking in the tangles of vines, geological formations and wildlife as it is about the adrenaline rush. I'm hooked, so I sign up with Hike Barbados (hikebarbados.com). Hikes are free (but donations for the Barbados National Trust are happily accepted) and vary in intensity from the two-mile Grin and Bear to the Medium and Fast Medium treks (nine miles). I opt for the Stop and Stare (six miles) and romp through cane fields, gullies and tropical forests.

There are three things left on my not-to-miss list. Firstly, the >

stunning Harrison's Cave (harrisonscave.com). In the 'central uplands' (more or less the geographical centre of the island), this is a subterranean experience that inspires geologists as well as adventurous schoolchildren to board an underground tram. The great legacy of the sugar plantations is rum, the oldest distilled spirit in Barbados, first made in 1703 and there's nowhere better to learn about it than the Mount Gay Rum Barbados Distillery (mountgayrun.com) near Bridgetown. Finally, St Nicholas Abbey, built in 1660 in the parish of St Peter, is a genuine Jacobean mansion and a great place to get a sense of the island's history.

Barbados's beautiful coasts may have helped make it a second home to most of the world's multimillionaires, but its unique charm reverberates throughout the island. The postmen still tootle around on old Vespas, even the most fashionable of boutiques in Holetown are styled as pastel-coloured chattel houses, and you can bus from the north to the south of the island for £1. Stopping off for an excellent roti by the roadside, of course. ■