

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

CHICAGO, IL
SUNDAY 953.814
AUG 28 2005



BurrellesLuce

210 .101945
v..a 3 xx LK
n

10 Caribbean retreats under \$160 a night

By David Swanson
Special to the Tribune

Caribbean hoteliers count on blizzards wending through the northeast to keep their reservations office hopping each winter. By contrast, when low season rolls around, hotels can barely give away rooms, even though the region's allure is still well intact. A beachfront room at Marriott's Morningstar Beach Resort in St. Thomas—normally \$576 a night in high season—is discounted nearly 54 percent in summer and fall.

That markdown sounds great, until you realize the room rate is still \$267 a night—a princely sum for most of us. You can get a cheaper room at the Marriott, but it's located well away from the beach. Apparently, everyone wants a seafront balcony edged by white sand.

But there are beachfront bargains, even on the priciest islands like Anguilla and St. Barts. Here are 10 of my favorites, offering both solid

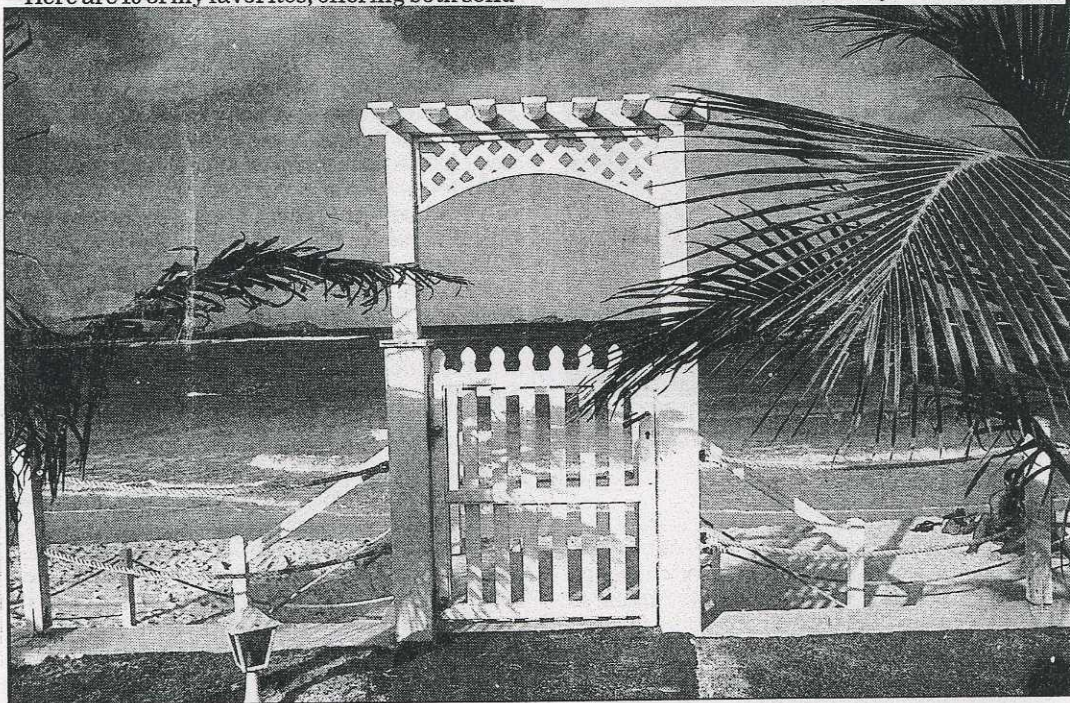
value and soft sand within a stone's throw of your room. It's a stealthy group: You won't find any name-brand chain resorts. These are all smallish inns—a few don't have a restaurant or bar on the premises, and one doesn't even have a front desk. Some are on islands that take a bit more effort to reach.

But, with rates for the Caribbean's low season—it begins in mid-April and continues through mid-December, when high season normally begins—topping out at \$160 a night for two, these places are a great deal for anyone seeking a quick fix of sun on the back and sand between the toes.

Carimar Beach Club, Anguilla

From \$160

Pricey Anguilla has more than its fair share of superb beaches, and the dozen or so that are occupied by resorts big and small represent varying degrees of fabulous. But when Malliouhana—the island's first major resort—was



Photos by David Swanson

SEA-AND-BE-SCENE: Beyond the gate at the Bleu Outre Mer on St. Barts is trendy St. Jean Beach.

scouting for a location and had its pick of the litter, its developers chose lovely Meads Bay. Today there still is no better sweep of pearly white sand on Anguilla.

But you don't have to challenge your gold-card limit to stay on Meads Bay, for right on the beach is 24-unit Carimar Beach Club, individually owned condos wrapped around a nicely tended garden. Room decor is straightforward, but consistently attractive. Each of the one- and two-bedroom units has a full kitchen, so you can stock up from the local deli for easy meals. All have a view of the sea, and the more expensive

rooms in front sit right on the sand. There's an \$8 a night surcharge for air conditioning. There's no restaurant or bar, but you'll find three of the island's better dining rooms within a 10-minute walk, and the front desk will help with reservations and other assistance.

MVC Eagle Beach, Aruba

\$60

Aruba is best known for the high-rises that line Palm Beach. The next strand south, Eagle Beach, is just as beautiful, and the hotels tend to be smaller, the action on the sand a bit more relaxed. And last year a marine recreational camp was converted into a simple, upbeat 19-room inn, right across the street from the beach.

Accommodations are found in a two-story lodge facility and are small and modestly decorated—each has two twin beds, private shower and bathroom, and air conditioning; rooms do not have TVs or phones. There are three “family rooms,” which are double the size. A mostly Dutch crowd stays at the MVC, congregating around a casual and inexpensive restaurant serving local specialties; a tennis court and a shallow pool ideal for children round out the facilities.

The MVC is not the Ritz, but it's the best buy in the Dutch Antilles.

SeaFoam Haciendas, Barbados

From \$110

Chock-a-block with upscale restaurants and luxury resorts, Barbados is one of the Caribbean's more polished destinations. But fortunately for us, the island's well-honed tourist infrastructure means there's not only an array of sightseeing and recreation options, but a decent contingent of affordable lodging options, most of them apartment-style buildings found along the south coast.

At the three-story SeaFoam Haciendas, 12 two-bedroom units overlook a loamy beach and provide everything you need for a housekeeping set-up, including a full, smartly equipped kitchen. Cable TV, direct-dial phones, air conditioning and full maid services are part of the package. Every apartment has a wide balcony offering a sea view through almond and casuarina trees.

Watersports are nearby, as are abundant dining and nightlife options, minimizing the need for a rental car (the island's scheduled bus service is an easy way to travel along the beach-lined coasts). The SeaFoam team will hook you up with a local chef who can prepare meals in your room for far less than local restaurant