

A beach within reach

By David Swanson

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

ST. BARTS, French West Indies
Take your pick: You can find a hotel where the milky blue Caribbean laps up practically right on your doorstep, or you can find a bargain room rate. But you can't often find both.

There are, however, a few tantalizing exceptions — beachfront bargains on even the priciest of islands, such as Anguilla and St. Barts.

They're a particularly good deal right now during low season, which runs through mid-December at most hotels. It's a few degrees warmer than in the winter, and you run the risk of the occasional hurricane. In more than 40 visits this time of year spread over two decades, though, I've never encountered a tempest — but I've appreciated the lower prices and less crowded beaches. Room rates rise when the weather turns chilly in North America, but even then these hotels are good deals.

What follows 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.

All of them skated through the recent hurricanes without damage, but the Hacienda de la Tortuga in Akumal, Mexico, required a big cleanup, which has been completed.

Anguilla

Pricey Anguilla has more than its share of superb beaches, and the dozen or so that are occupied by resorts big and small represent varying degrees of fabulousness. But when Malliouhana — the island's first major resort — was scouting for a location and had its pick of the litter, its developers chose lovely Meads Bay. Today, still, there 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 the 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 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.

Carimar Beach Club, The Valley, Anguilla, British West Indies. (800) 235-8667, www.carimar.com. Doubles \$160-\$200 in summer, plus 20 percent tax/service; \$365-\$440 in winter. Closed September and October.

Aruba

Aruba's lodgings are 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. Last year, a marine recreational camp was converted into a simple, upbeat 19-room inn, right across the street from the beach.

Accommodations occupy a two-story lodge 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. Three “family rooms” 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 Carimar Beach Club sits on one of Anguilla's best white-sand beaches, on Meads Bay.

Operated by Lee and Jane Issa, who run the nearby Couples all-inclusive resort, Idle Awhile is a charming 13-room inn possessing oversized rooms and tall louvered windows opening onto tended gardens and swank decor marked by a bold red and green color scheme that might best be termed tropical moderne. Most of the very comfortable rooms lack beach views, but upper units have cathedral ceilings.

The restaurant specializes in Jamaican cuisine, and a vegetarian lunch special is offered daily. As a bonus, guests have privileges at the nearby Swept Away sports cility and get free Wi-Fi access.

Idle Awhile, Negril, Jamaica.

(877) 243-5352, www.idleawhile.com. \$115-\$200 plus 16.25 percent tax/service charge; \$180-\$290 winter.

Also in Negril

Surprisingly, many of the original accommodations built in Negril in the 1970s weren't on the sand, but along a 2-mile stretch of cliffs just past the beach, known as the West End. Here, more than a dozen small hotels are perched along the rocks. Steps, ladders or cave-like passageways lead down to the water. No, they're not beachfront, but swimming and snorkeling amid the seductive grottos is rewarding in its own way.

Built in 1972, Rockhouse has since seen considerable refurbishing and expansion and can now claim the hip milieu of a rugged boutique resort. But your wallet won't be taken for a ride. Least expensive are rooms in two-story buildings set back from the cliff — they're small and short on privacy, but clean and attractive. Better are the original thatch-roof stone cottages, some of which have private outdoor showers — you can dive into the water from a few of the rooms, or from wooden bridges spanning the cliffs.

A striking modern pool and bar has been built into the rocks, while a block of new bungalows brings the number of accommodations to 34.

Rockhouse, Negril, Jamaica. (876) 957-4373, www.rockhousehotel.com. \$75-\$195 plus 16.25 percent tax/service charge; \$125-\$250 winter.

Martinique

The French islands aren't the best place to look for bargains today because the euro — the official currency of the French West Indies — is trouncing the dollar. But the dollar has been creeping back a little so, throwing caution to the wind, here's my favorite beach deal in Martinique.

Diamant les Bains is a palm-embroidered, family-owned hotel facing famous Diamond Rock and St. Lucia. Situated right on the beach at the edge of town, this compact mini-resort holds sufficient charisma, and the owners host many American guests. (Book early to get the dates you want). The main building houses the older, and least expensive, of 24 units (beware traffic noise), while just a few dollars more gets a bed in the collection of sweet bungalows occupying a grassy terrace between the pool and the good, little-used beach.

They have air conditioning, unpretentious character and island ambience, and the restaurant is the local's pick for classic Creole cuisine, sometimes accompanied by merengue dancing.

Diamant les Bains, Diamant, Martinique. 011-596-596-76-40-14; no Web site, but pictures and additional information can be found via search engines. \$81-\$94 including breakfast; \$127-\$149 in winter

Akumal, Mexico

In contrast to the French islands, your dollar buys more in Mexico, whose Caribbean coast stretches from Cancún south for more than 100 miles. But you have to dodge the resort strips to find places of character or intimacy.

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