

Caribbean cloud nine

Find your place in the sun at one of these idyllic island vacation utopias

by **Doug Wallace**

Get a jump on the season with a solid plan for the sunny south. These island retreats will spoil you rotten with beautiful weather, great food and unique cultural charm.

Antigua and Barbuda

This twin-island paradise on the northeast corner of the Caribbean is an independent nation with British ties. Antigua enjoys more than 150 kilometres of coastline and 365 beaches — one for every day of the year — while Barbuda is the celebrity hideaway, famous for its pink sand and frigate bird sanctuary.

Extracurricular: Antigua is a big hiking island, with easy routes including the three-kilometre Jones Valley Trail, which yields plenty of sea views. English Harbour is the yachting mecca, home to Nelson's Dockyard and other nautical heritage.

Taste to try: Local specialties include conch fritters and chowders, salt cod, blood sausage and ducana — a dumpling made of grated sweet potato and coconut.

Bonus tip: Book your time to coincide with the annual Carnival at the end of July, which celebrates the abolition of slavery with a 10-day fete.

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PHOTO, PRZEMYSŁAW SKIBINSKI





Puerto Rico

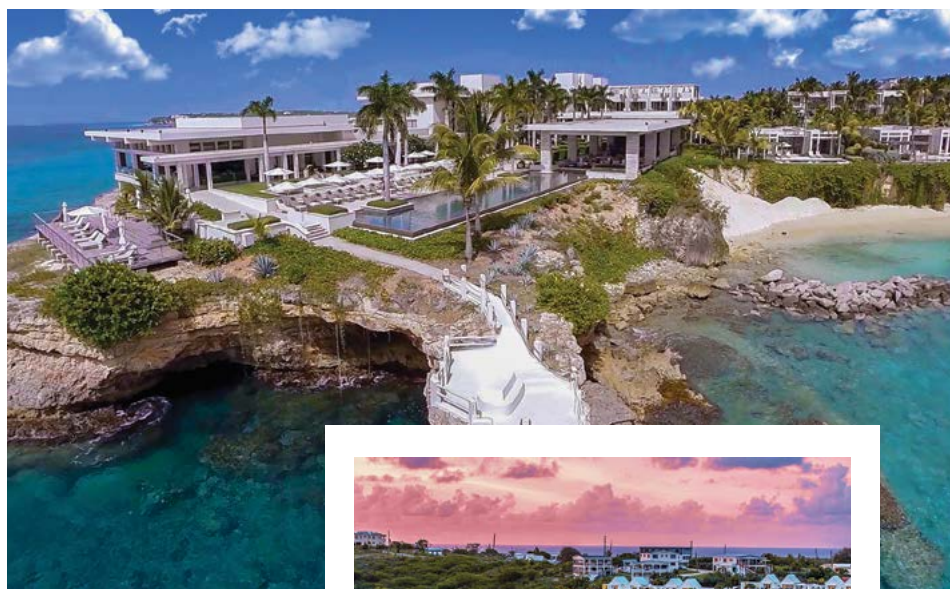
This cosmopolitan American territory in the northern Caribbean hits all the right notes — waterfront fun, luxe beach clubs, great restaurants, historic charm, a café culture. There’s so much going on that the challenge will be trying to fit it all in.

Extracurricular: Hiking in the El Yunque National Forest is an exercise in complete rejuvenation, a true nature bath. Hopping on a boat tour to the nearby islands of Vieques or Culebra serves up a stop at the stunning, top-rated Flamenco Beach.

Taste to try: San Juan is a culinary wonderland. The traditional mofongo comprises fried and mashed plantains dotted with crunchy pork skin served swimming in olive oil and garlic with meat or seafood.

Bonus tip: Puerto Rico has three bioluminescent bays, an ecosystem in which microscopic algae produce glow-in-the-dark light caused by the movement of your kayak paddle.

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Anguilla

Just a short ferry ride north of Saint Martin, this British territory offers 33 white-sand beaches, gorgeous sub-tropical weather and plenty of water sports to bring you fully into the moment.

Extracurricular: An afternoon of sailing from bay to bay on a classic sailboat or powerboat are just two cruise options. Live music is very much a part of Anguillan culture, with locals and tourists moving to reggae, jazz and R&B almost every night throughout the island.

Taste to try: Expect a full restaurant culture here, high- and low-end. Crayfish is the local specialty, with lobster, snapper and mahi mahi rounding out the menus.

Bonus tip: Earmark Wednesday or Sunday for lunch on Scilly Cay. The whole island is a rustic open-air family-run restaurant on a tiny coral islet off the village of Island Harbour.

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TOP PHOTOS: SEAN PAVON, MIKOLAJIN. BOTTOM PHOTOS, COURTESY OF FOUR SEASONS, COURTESY OF CEBLUE VILLAS.

Turks and Caicos

Tucked underneath the Bahamas, the series of islands and cays that make up Turks and Caicos deliver mile after mile of almost-empty beaches under sunny skies, 350 days of the year. Providenciales, on the Caicos side, is the top spot for the chic resorts lining Grace Bay Beach, once again the winner of TripAdvisor’s Travelers’ Choice award for best beach.

Extracurricular: Seek out ecoadventure with a paddling or boat tour of the wetlands and mangrove networks. There are many miles of estuaries to explore.

Taste to try: Grouper is the delicious fish of choice, served a dozen different ways, followed closely by conch fritters and delectable conch ceviche.

Bonus tip: Between December and April, be on the lookout for migrating humpback whales moving through the Turks Island Passage on their way to the Dominican Republic.

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Grenada

The tri-island haven of Grenada, Carriacou and Petite Martinique at the bottom of the Grenadines boasts white sand, azure shorelines, hidden waterfalls and unspoiled nature.

Extracurricular: Pushing through the clouds on a hike up forest-covered Mount Qua Qua in the Grand Etang National Park delivers incredible views of Grand Etang Lake, a crater lake within an extinct volcano.

Taste to try: Curried conch, grilled barracuda, ginger lobster — Grenada’s cuisine hits the spot thanks to spices the island is well-known for: nutmeg and mace, turmeric, cinnamon, pimento, bay leaves, cloves and ginger — not to mention the tree-to-bar chocolate.

Bonus tip: Be sure to snorkel or scuba dive through the Molinere Bay Underwater Sculpture Park, an artificial reef teeming with marine life. The haunting *Vicissitudes* is the most noted work: 26 life-size children standing in a circle.

PUREGRENADA.COM

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Curaçao

Dutch colonial roots lend a European vibe to the islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, just north of Venezuela. The capital city of Willemstad is continually turning once-derelict districts into chic little enclaves of arts and culture — cocktail bars, fine dining, music, art and all.

Extracurricular: Beach-hop your way along the island’s 35 beaches, slipping into the nooks and crannies, swimming with turtles and snorkelling the coral reefs.

Taste to try: Keep an eye out for keshi yena, the island’s signature dish — a baked cheese ball stuffed with spicy meats, olives, capers, onions and tomato.

Bonus tip: Kurá Hulanda Museum holds the largest African collection in the Caribbean within 15 buildings, chronicling the African slave trade and West African empires, along with pre-Columbian gold, Mesopotamian relics and Antillean art.

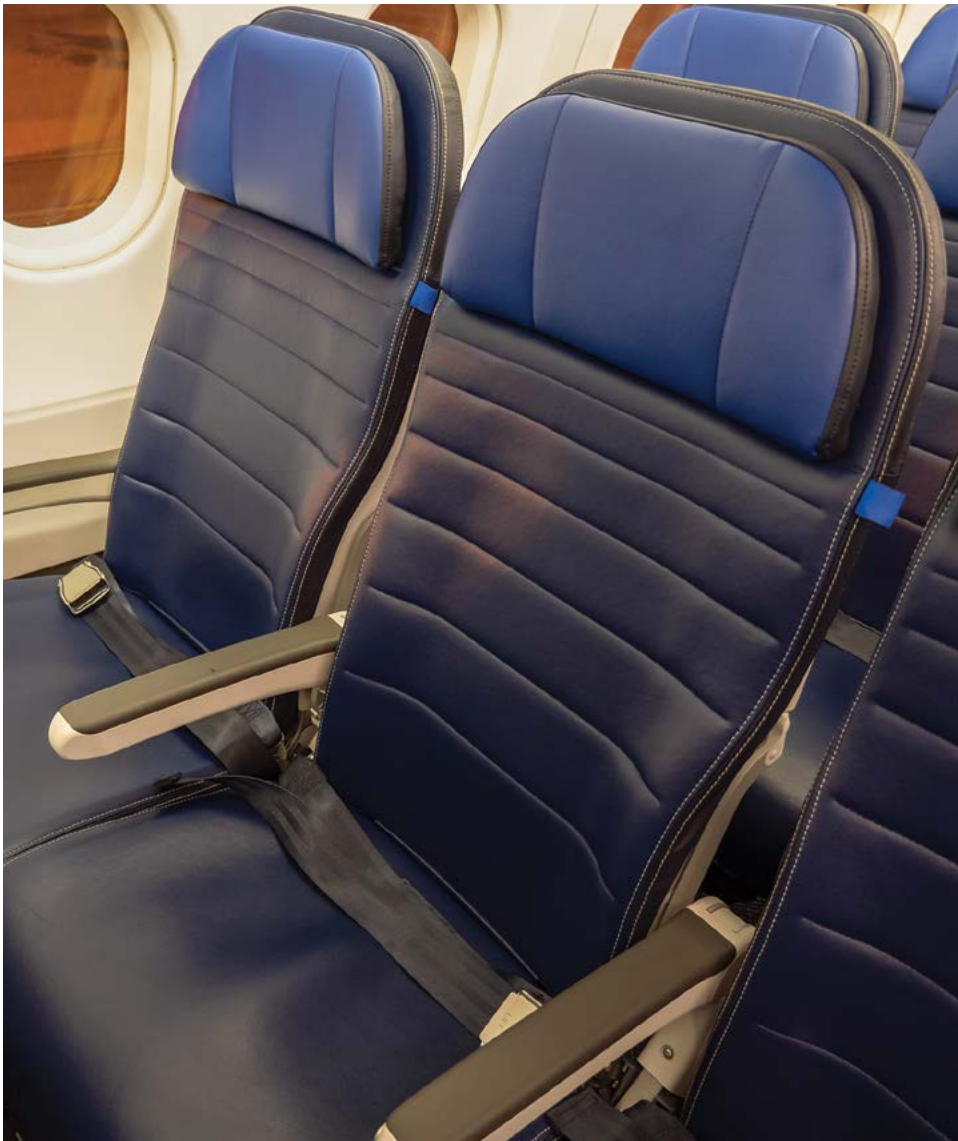
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PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GRACECAT, ZSTOCK; PETER JAN RIJPKEMA, JORDI SLOOTS

When you're stuck in the middle

"How do I make the most of a middle seat?"



Wouldn't it be nice if they made the middle seats just a little bit bigger? If you always seem to draw the short straw, there are ways to make your trip more palatable.

First, try to check in online as early as possible to sidestep the problem completely. If this fails, ask at the airport counter if any other seats have become available since you checked in.

If you are destined for a middle-seat fate, put as much of your hand luggage in the overhead bin as possible so you can have maximum legroom. Try not to worry about asking the person in the aisle seat to let you out if you need to get in your carry-on. Hopefully, they will be young or slim or both. As soon as everyone is seated, stake your claim on the most comfortable parts of both armrests. This is an unwritten rule of aircraft entitlement.

During the flight, pretend your seatmates don't exist and that you are in your own little bubble – read, work, watch a movie, meditate, sleep. Keeping busy makes the time go faster. For the sake of convenience, try to time your bio-breaks with everyone else in the row.

And if none of the above will work for you? Simply shell out for the Premium Economy upgrade and be done with it.

TOP 10 WAYS TO BE A BETTER TRAVEL COMPANION

You don't have to be the life of the party nor as quiet as a mouse – you simply have to go with the flow.

1. Be on time for the airport. No one wants to start a vacation stressed by your tardiness.
2. Don't be: whiny, fussy, grumpy, hoity, bossy, shirty – or anything ill-tempered that ends in "y."
3. Never complain unless it is imperative to your comfort – and then do it nicely.
4. Don't fixate – on how bad lunch was, on last night's mattress, on your aching feet.
5. Be ready to adapt when plans change. Everybody likes a good pivoter! This ability is what separates travellers from mere tourists.
6. Learn how to nap. Sleeping when you can gives you the energy you need to be an amusing and intrepid travel mate.
7. Know when to shut up – especially if you talk to yourself. No one wants to hear you vocalizing every thought that comes into your head.
8. Be honest. If you need some time alone, say so. If you're asked for your opinion, give one.
9. Be helpful. Offer suggestions, take your turn at leading or navigating or driving, carry your weight.
10. Be quick with your wallet – no one wants to travel with a tightwad. 🙄

Do you have a travel question?

Doug has the answer! Email your question to renaissance@rtoero.ca and it may appear in an upcoming issue.



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TravelRight.Today,
and your in-the-know
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