

DAILY



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WEATHER: **CLOUDY BUT DRY**

PLUS

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Travel

Laid-back life with Caribbean chic

CAP MAISON, ST LUCIA

This intimate hotel opened last year on a former 1,500-acre sugar plantation above Smugglers Cove on St Lucia's north-west tip, with sweeping sea views across to the neighbouring island of Martinique.

Spread across a two-storey villa, the 50 rooms and suites are decked out in a mixture of Spanish and Caribbean design with hand-painted tiles, colonial-style hardwood furniture and local artwork. The larger suites have their own kitchens, dining areas and private pools.

Head to the beach for free use of kayaks and snorkelling equipment, shop at the chic boutiques in nearby Rodney Bay and dine on French-West Indian-inspired fare at the hotel's Cliff at Cap restaurant, perched on the cliff edge. There's also a spa.

Getting there: Caribtours (0207 751 0660/www.caribtours.co.uk) offers seven nights at Cap Maison from £1,520pp (two sharing), B&B. Price includes return flights from Gatwick to St Lucia and transfers. Spa treatments from £38.

THE SANDPIPER, BARBADOS

Surrounded by orchid trees and bougainvillea, this family run, 47-room hotel is located on St James beach on Barbados's west coast. Push the boat out and go for a tree-top suite for two, complete with four-poster bed, free-standing bath and terrace with private pool.

After a pre-dinner cocktail at the informal beach bar or Ralph Lauren-inspired cocktail bar, head to the award-winning restaurant. On Wednesday nights there is a buffet with everything from roast beef to Bajan flying fish and Sunday is barbecue night, accompanied by live steel pan music. There is also complimentary tennis coaching,

entertainment on most nights and a spa at the Sandpiper's sister hotel Coral Reef Club.

Getting there: Seasons (01244 202002/www.seasons.co.uk) offers seven nights at The Sandpiper from £1,675pp (two sharing), B&B. Price includes return flights from Gatwick to Barbados and transfers. Spa treatments from £38.

COTTON HOUSE, MUSTIQUE

Originally an 18th-century cotton warehouse, the Cotton House is set among landscaped gardens just steps from the white sands of Endeavour Bay, on the island of Mustique.

It has 17 elegant rooms, suites

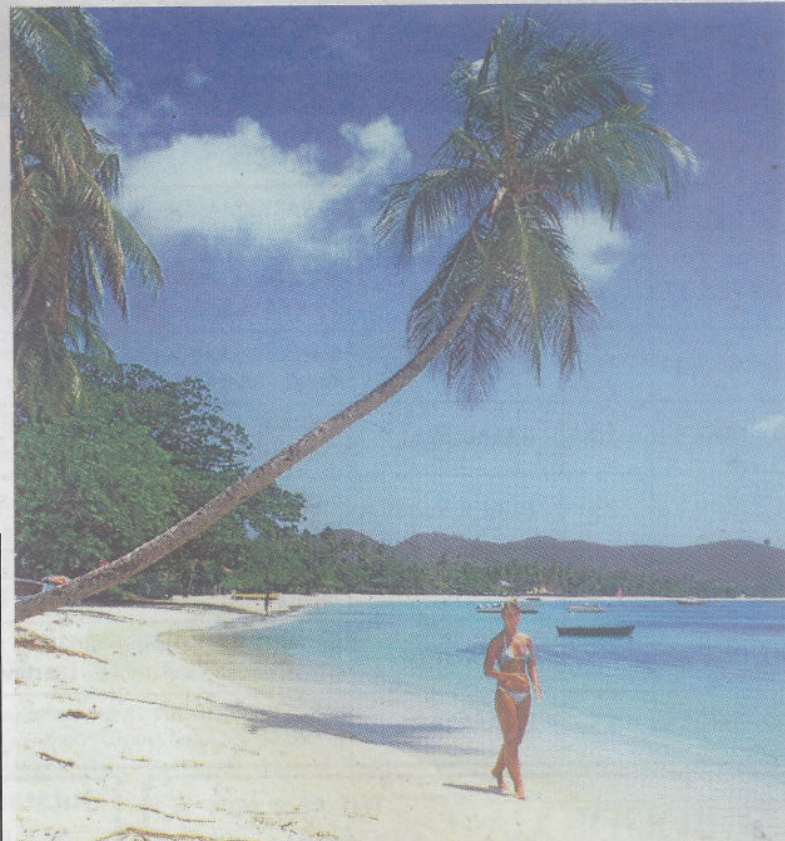
and cottages, sleeping up to four, many with their own private plunge pool.

After a morning spent horse riding, sailing or exploring the island's nature trails, head to the spa for a soothing aloe and lavender body wrap before afternoon tea in the colonial-style Great Room where the cotton was originally stored.

The fine-dining Veranda Restaurant is one of the best in the West Indies with signature dishes such as sea bass carpaccio with Venetian caviar. **Getting there:** Prestbury Travel Group (01625 855840/www.prestburytravelcaribbean.co.uk) offers seven nights at the Cotton House from £1,460pp (two



ELEGANCE: The Cotton House on Mustique is set among landscaped gardens



NICE 'N' EASY: Grand Anse beach is just below Grenada's Mount Cinnamon resort

sharing), B&B. Price includes return flights from Gatwick to Mustique and transfers. Spa treatments from £47. Horse riding, sailing and other activities arranged on request.

MOUNT CINNAMON, GRENADA

Located on a tranquil hillside above Grand Anse Beach in the south of the island, this laid-back resort has 21 suites and villas.

Expect bold furnishings, contemporary artwork, a large sitting room with a sofa bed, kitchen and unbeatable sea views.

The terrace restaurant is just as impressive, mixing English gastro-pub nosh with West Indian classics.

Tempting as it is to flop by the pool or in the spa, the activities on offer are endless, from sailing and billfishing to river-tubing and hiking tours. The attractive colonial capital St George's is a short drive away.

Getting there: Caribtours (0207 751 0660/www.caribtours.co.uk) offers seven nights at Mount Cinnamon from £1,375pp (two sharing), half board. Price includes

return flights from Gatwick to Grenada and transfers. Spa treatments from £34.

MONTPELIER PLANTATION, NEVIS

This 18th-century sugar plantation, surrounded by 60 acres of tropical gardens and sugar cane fields, has been meticulously restored by its owners and transformed into an elegant boutique hideaway.

Family run and family friendly, it has 19 rooms, suites and cottages, sleeping up to four, all with sea views, bamboo flooring and rich fabrics.

Kick back by the fresh-water pool or on the private beach, go on a guided tour of the island's rainforests and sugar plantations, be pampered in the spa and dine on local seafood in the alfresco terrace restaurant.

Getting there: British Airways Holidays (0844 493 0758/www.ba.com/stkitts) offers seven nights at Montpelier Plantation from £2,175pp (two sharing), B&B. Price includes return flights from Gatwick to St Kitts and transfers. Spa treatments from £34.

arrivals

GRAND JOURNEY

A vision of grandeur in its navy blue and cream livery, the Danube Express (01462 441400/www.danube-express.com) is one of Europe's finest hotels-on-wheels. It offers deluxe and classic sleeping cars with wood-paneled walls and brass fittings.

New for 2011, the train will set off on its grandest journey yet, covering six countries in nine days, from Istanbul to the edge of the Baltic. The overland journey, which incorporates a full sightseeing programme, includes Bulgaria where ports of call are Kazanlak and the ancient capital of Veliko Turnovo. There will also be stops in Transylvania, Romania for excursions in Brasov and Sighisoara, then onward to Budapest and Warsaw. A nine-day Bosphorus to the Baltic

Journey is from £5,390pp (two sharing). Price includes six nights on the train (full board) and two nights hotel in Budapest (half board). Flights from the UK to Istanbul and return from Warsaw can be arranged on request.

NEW YEAR CHILL-OUT

Get the New Year off to a invigorating start with a dip in the Atlantic Ocean. Since 2000, Achill Island in County Mayo, Ireland, has seen thousands of swimmers flock to its beautiful coastline for a swim in the waters off Dugort Beach. It is now a seasonal tradition and this year may see more than 100 people braving the cold.

Achill is Ireland's largest island, easily accessible by road bridge from the picturesque Currane peninsula. If you are looking for

dramatic landscapes and seascapes it's all here. Take a drive along the coast to Keel village to view the magnificent Minaun Cliffs. There are also must-see archaeological, geological and historical sites including the striking Cathedral Rocks beneath Slievemore mountain and the famous Deserted Village - the ruins of



BRACING: New year bathers at Achill

more than 80 stone cottages scattered along a mile-long stretch.

Aer Lingus (0871 718 5000/www.aerlingus.com) offers return flights from Gatwick to Ireland West Airport (Knock) - just over an hour's drive from Achill - from £81. Achill Lodge (984 7878/www.achilllodge.ie) in the village of Bunnacurry in the heart of Achill offers doubles from €75 per night (two sharing), B&B.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

Throw off those winter wellies once you're indoors and slip into a pair of ballet-style pumps. Pretty Ballerinas (0207 493 3957/www.prettyballerinas.co.uk), are available in champagne leather, black patent, black leather, silver and ivory. They are ideal size to fit into a bag as a spare pair of

shoes as they fold in half and come in with their own zip-up leather pouch. Price, £112.

GIFTS WRAPPED UP

If you are stuck for ideas on what to buy a loved one, a new Gift Experience programme from Warner Leisure Hotels (0800 072 4114/www.warnergiftexperiences.co.uk) could solve the problem. Great gifts for her include day spa experiences, courses on flower arranging and painting. For him, there's An Introduction to Nordic Walking or the Golf Swing Build Clinic. Experiences take place at Warner's 13 hotels in England and Wales including country house hotels such as Thoresby Hall Hotel & Spa in Nottinghamshire and Littlecote Hotel in Berkshire. Gift Experiences from £25.

By CHARLOTTE CIVIL