



REBUILD: The smart Pavilion bar at Little Dix Bay resort in the British Virgin Islands

THE Caribbean has long been a favourite of British holidaymakers drawn to the islands' sheer beauty, laidback vibe and fabulous weather. Here, in the first part of a new series, JAMES HENDERSON reveals how bookings are soaring – and how the islands are getting ready to welcome back eager tourists after the pandemic.

By James Henderson

YEARNING for a winter break has an easy fix: the Caribbean. And with the islands open for business once again, holidaymakers are wasting no time in booking those long-missed places in the sun.

'People are just so keen to get away,' says James Bell of Turquoise Holiday Company, which has been sending sunseekers to the Caribbean for more than a decade. 'Bookings are 20 per cent up on pre-pandemic levels.'

Tour operators and agents have been rushed off their feet, as bookings delayed by the global lockdown are reactivated and new ones fly in.

Seats can be hard to come by (though ever-fluid as airlines rejig schedules each month); in some places the only solution is to buy an upgrade. The best plan is to use a tour operator and employ tactical thinking.

If you are not restricted to school holidays, then demand is lighter but the weather just as good.

The best bet is the first fortnight of December, before the festive price hike, then during the lull after the New Year, from January 5 until the 20th.

AND what of the hotels? With no certainty of when travellers would return, only a few have undergone major overhauls. However, there are some new resorts to enjoy that couldn't open during the heights of the pandemic, while others, in St Barts and the British Virgin Islands, have reopened after the devastating hurricanes of 2017.

Elegant Resorts, a Caribbean luxury specialist, has seen the region develop over the past 30 years, and revealed that the hottest ticket this year is for St Barts. While it has the usual superb beaches, thanks to its French chic and sophistication it is unlike anywhere else in the Caribbean.

Guanahani, the island's largest resort – although it has fewer than 70 rooms – reopens next month after a major rebuild. Its suites and cottages jangle in pastel colours on a 16-acre hillside, each with a terrace and sea view amid the greenery.

Book: Seven nights in an Ocean View Room at Rosewood Le Guanahani, B&B with flights, UK lounge access and private transfers from £8,395pp (elegantresorts.com).

Nearby Anguilla has long been on the radar of luxury travellers. It doesn't have the physical drama or lushness of Jamaica

The CARIBBEAN comeback

Mesmerising views, classy hotels and guaranteed sun! No wonder Britons are flocking once more to the paradise isles

or St Lucia – it is dry and flat – but it has utterly magnificent beaches and, like St Barts, has excellent restaurants, villas and beach bars. Aurora Anguilla is the revamped resort formerly known as Cuisinart. Under new management, it has lost the whitewashed walls and blue flashes of its Mediterranean inspiration, and now feels more metropolitan.

It was always well known for its spa, which remains, as well as its Greg Norman 18-hole golf course, and there are plans eventually to build a further nine holes.

Book: Suites start at £7,777 per night (**WEB-SITE ADDRESS**), return flights on Virgin Atlantic cost from £605 with inter-island flights at £395.

The Morrow family has owned Jamaica Inn since 1950 and the 55-room hotel is the epitome of the island's traditional hospitality. Bond author Ian Fleming played bridge with the owners here, sipped its martinis and then slipped it into Dr No.

It's a glamorous, grown-up retreat in its own cove so offers fabulous privacy, plus

NEW LOOK: The Sugar Beach Hotel in St Lucia, top. Above right: A room at Petit St Vincent resort and, right, pirate fun on a sun-kissed beach

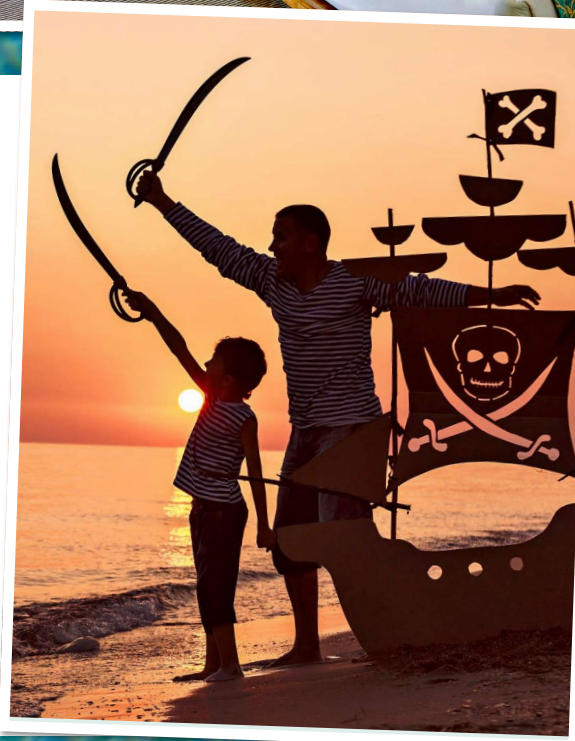
no children under ten, no TVs, a cocktail party each evening and dress code for dinner. 'All our space is outside,' says owner Eric Morrow, 'so guests can relax. Even when we're at near full capacity, it doesn't feel crowded.'

New for Christmas breaks will be a beachside pizzeria where guests can watch the stars come out.

Book: From £378 per room per night, including breakfast (jamaicainn.com).

When the pandemic struck, the British Virgin Islands had just about recovered from the 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria, so previous visitors will see a lot of changes.

Little Dix Bay has had a complete rebuild. The resort is situated on a perfect bay, one of four locations selected by Caribbean pioneer Laurance Rocke-



feller to site his hotels – the scion of the wealthy American Rockefeller family had the pick of the islands when he sailed through in the 1950s.

The new Little Dix Bay retains the lovely rough-stone walls and shingle roofs of Rockefeller's original, but gone are the terracotta tiles and in come a range of woods with light-coloured walls and fabrics, and a seam of deep blue. It also has an excellent spa and a good children's club.

Book: Seven nights in an Ocean View Cottage at Little Dix Bay in February, including international and inter-island flights to Tortola and boat transfers, costs £4,540pp (tropicbreeze.co.uk).

Elsewhere in the British Virgin Islands, Long Bay Beach Resort, set on a superb beach in Tortola, was new when the pandemic hit, so had to close its doors almost immediately after opening. Now running at full steam, it has 20 suites in three villas with a mix of bright walls, whitewashed and natural woodwork and black-and-white photographs.

The air of seaside somnolence is perfected by a waterfront restaurant, beach bar and coffee shop (longbay.com).

The Aerial hotel sets itself a more conscious brief, using its fantastic setting on a cliff-top on a private island, with a stupendous view over Sir Francis Drake Channel, to inspire guests with its focus on personal wellbeing. Or you could just hire the whole island and chill out (aerialbvi.com).

And raffish old Saba Rock, a sail-up bar on a stone blip in the North Sound, has smartened up – now it has a funky, brightly coloured surfer vibe (sabarock.com).

Sugar Beach Hotel, set between the twin Piton mountains on St Lucia, reopens next month after extensive work.

There is a new beach restaurant and high-

tech fitness centre, and cabanas around the central pool (with butler service), all surveyed from above by the Great Room restaurant which itself has been given a contemporary refresh to accompany the resort's modern sculptures and artwork.

The beachfront bungalows have been restyled, the vanguard of a change to come in all the rooms.

Book: Seven nights in a Luxury Sugar Mill room, including flights, private transfers and UK airport lounges, from £3,299pp, room-only. Based on a December 12 departure (caribtours.co.uk).

IF YOU prefer a breeze with your cocktail, head into the mountains to Hotel Chocolat's Rabot Hotel. The high street chocolatier, which sources its cocoa from plantations on St Lucia, is opening a further ten suites to take advantage of the view of the Petit Piton. There's a cool new deck where you can create chocolate bars in a Bean To Bar experience (hotelchocolat.com/uk/rabothotel). **COST/DETAILS?**

Barbados will be fully back up to speed for the winter, but the island is also a transit for the smaller islands of the Grenadines, whose hotels are ideal if you wish to avoid the crowds. James Bell at Turquoise Holi-

days says: 'We have seen a desire for a shorter stay on Barbados, with the buzz of Hometown and its restaurants, but then an escape to a barefoot island, like Petit St Vincent in the Grenadines, where guests can totally relax and enjoy a low-key vibe.'

The tiny island of Petit St Vincent, devoted to a single hotel, normally closes in September to clean up after the summer season. This year, however, its 20 or so cottages have been overhauled and are ready for winter sun-seekers. Internet access at the main Pavilion has also been upgraded, but of course the point of going there is to forget about the outside world entirely.

Seven nights in a one-bedroom cottage, including all meals, non-alcoholic drinks, international and inter-island flights to Union Island and boat transfers, costs from £6,759pp (turquoiseholidays.co.uk).

Despite the caveats of meeting Covid regulations, the Caribbean islands are essentially fully back up to speed for the winter. Confident hotel managers have even booked Santa to arrive on the beach on a jet-ski on Christmas Day and local bands are tuning up to play carols on steel drums.

Definitely something to satisfy that yearning for a winter break.

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THE best of Caribbean life is outdoors, and while there it's not hard to keep your distance from other tourists.

Most islands require visitors to be double-vaccinated, and most of the top hotels require the same of their drivers and staff, so in theory you will be in an

environment with a low likelihood of Covid transmission.

If you are travelling as a family and wish to keep your distance from others, consider a private villa or one in a villa resort. Either way, ensure that your booking is protected and travel with

Peaceful haven in the heart of Paris

By Annabel Simms

NEXT time you visit Paris, carve out some time to visit Ile St Louis.

This little island, connected to Notre Dame by a footbridge, has no famous monuments and no Metro link, but is the perfect choice for a quiet pause or a stroll away from the crowds.

Just under half a mile long, it was developed in the 17th Century as an extension of the newly fashionable Marais district, in the style which reached its apogee at Versailles and gives the island its satisfying architectural unity.

Today it is a favourite place for many Parisians to take their Sunday walks, buy an ice cream or just sit on its quiet quaysides. They come to play the guitar, picnic and sunbathe, with the iconic views of Paris across the sparkling water.

The normal roar of city traffic is dissolved by the river. The main sounds on Ile St Louis are seagulls and drifting commentaries from the passing bateaux-mouches – the open-top tourist boats – and the waves washing against the quay in their wake.

A friend visiting from London was astonished to notice that several sunny hours had sped by as we sat



DRINK IT IN: The best views of Notre Dame are from Le Flore en l'île cafe

talking on the quay, and that we were then surrounded by young Parisians who were barely making a sound. That could never happen in London, she said, deeply impressed.

You'll find the cafe, Le Flore en l'île, has the best views of Notre Dame and the Left Bank.

A very Parisian snack of oysters and a glass of white wine can be had at Poget & De Witte's oyster bar, or something sweeter can be found at Berthillon's ice-cream parlour, founded in 1954 and famous for using only natural ingredients.

Afterwards, admire the Baroque church of St Louis-en-l'île.

Also take time to see the grand, privately owned mansion, the Hotel Lambert, which was designed and decorated in 1640 by the creators of Versailles, and overlooks the eastern tip of the island. Considered one of the most beautiful houses in Paris, it is currently owned by the brother of the Emir of Qatar.

Next door, the equally resplendent Hotel de Lauzun has drainpipes in the form of dolphins with their scales picked out in gold.

● Annabel Simms is the author of *An Hour From Paris and Half An Hour From Paris*.