



Cruises to Barbados Offer a Truly Unique Caribbean Experience

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Photos courtesy Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc.

By John Roberts



Cheryl Franklin

Barbados already stands out among the Caribbean destinations you can visit on a cruise.

You might know it as the homeland of music superstar Rihanna. But it's also the easternmost island, a full 100 miles from its neighbors to the west -- the Windward chain that includes St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia and Martinique.

Cheryl Franklin is on a mission to further distinguish her country from other Caribbean nations by working with tour operators to curate onshore experiences that can easily tell the story of the country and its rich history through a range of fun and memorable experiences. Franklin is the director of cruise for the Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc. I chatted with her during the annual Seatrade conference in Fort Lauderdale to find out what's new with one of our favorite destinations.

It's Franklin's goal to raise the profile of this magical place by allowing cruisers to have access to as much as possible during their limited time visiting during a port stop. In the end, she wants you to leave the country with the quintessential Barbados experience that makes you want to tell your friends and family -- and return again and again, of course.

A big goal for Franklin is to get cruise lines to consider staying later in port. Barbados has a vibrant night life that she thinks visitors will love.

"You can do something in the morning, and then in the evening," she said. "You get more of a multidimensional experience."

Are you going to be on a sailing that calls on this festive and culturally rich island? Here are some activities Franklin suggests to have the ultimate day ashore on your cruise to Barbados.



Barbados offers vibrant festivals, historic places of interest (like St. Nicholas Abbey) and is the birthplace of rum.



TOUR HERITAGE AND HISTORY

Barbados is home to two of the three remaining Jacobean mansions in the western hemisphere. St. Nicholas Abbey was built in 1658 and is open to the public, and Drax Hall is a private residence on the island. Jacobean is an English architectural style dating to the early 17th century and named for King James I. The buildings feature dramatic steep gables on the roof lines and sweeping staircases.

St. Nicholas Abbey offers tours of the home and its onsite rum distillery and former plantation.

"It's an amazing world-class distillery and heritage experience." Franklin says.

Barbados also has one of the oldest Jewish synagogues in the western hemisphere. The Nidhe Israel Synagogue is located in the capital city of Bridgetown, about 1.5 miles from the cruise port. The synagogue is a UNESCO World Heritage site, and it features a museum and graveyard that cruisers will like to visit, Franklin says.

IMMERSE YOURSELF IN NATURE

For thrill-seekers, Barbados is a wonderland. We all know about the snorkeling, boating and other water sports on offer at most Caribbean islands, and you get all this on Barbados, too.

Franklin recommends kite-surfing or surfing lessons, scuba diving, water skiing. She also picked out a few experiences that show Barbados from a different perspective.

Bushy Park is a highlight, Franklin says. The race track hosts drag racing, karting and top circuit drivers, and visitors can sign up to take the wheel (or ride alongside a pro driver) for exciting "radical driving" experiences at the track.

Microlight aerial tours offer a fairly new adventure and a way to see Barbados from high in the sky. You climb into what looks like a two-person hang-glider with a motor and rotor at the back, and up you go to get a view of the island, marveling in its coastline and rugged terrain.

Also, PEG Farm and Nature Reserve offers an eco-experience. The farm practices agriculture using methods unique to the Caribbean: biodynamics, free-range animal husbandry, permaculture and holistic resources management.

The walking tour takes place amid incredible scenery, Franklin says, and is an interesting educational opportunity as well.

"A scenic walking tour highlights all sorts of foliage and trees," she said "It's very botanical and environmental."

CHILL LIKE A BARBADIAN

The Caribbean is the most-popular cruising region in the world, and nearly every one of the individual islands offers wonderful beaches and sunshine to enjoy. After a few Caribbean cruises, though, it can be hard to recall exactly where you were when you reminisce about your trips.

If you don't get off the boat and do much more than head to a sandy beach and splash around in the clear blue waters while sipping a cold cocktail or local beer, you won't enjoy anything that distinguishes one spot from another.

Don't you want something better, something much more immersive and authentic?

You can easily enjoy a quintessential day on Barbados one that incorporates relaxation, food, music and time with island residents, Franklin says.

"I would say an island tour that takes you completely off the beaten track into the heart of the country," she said. "Where you get the really traditional sense of community."

Taxis are available at the cruise ship terminal, and the drivers are registered tour guides. Taxi tours are safe, and you can precisely customize your activities for the day to see as much of the island and do specific things on your list.

Ask the driver to take you to a "rum shop." There are thousands across the island, and these are "akin to a pub in England, where we get much of our heritage," Franklin said.

They are located in every village. Ask your cabbie to take you one near a beach or fun village where you can also explore and do some shopping. These venues are where you can sit and enjoy a rum beverage and meal of traditional West Indies specialties while learning the town gossip or discuss politics and sports. The rum shops are locales for live music, karaoke and beach parties, too.

"It's the best food and cultural experience that does not get tampered with at all," she said. "It's not sophisticated, but it's pure, and it's safe. Anybody can go into a rum shop."

The most authentic Barbadian dishes would include macaroni pie, fried flying fish, cou cou (meat with gravy, cornmeal and okra), fish cakes and rum punch. One of the most popular rum shops is Bay Tavern on the east coast of the island in a small fishing village at Martins Bay.

Trying one or more of these recommended activities sounds wonderful and certainly will make your time ashore in Barbados stand out. The island is compact so that you can reach almost anywhere and easily get back to your ship after a full day of adventures.

"What's unique about Barbados is that it's diverse in a very consolidated way," Franklin said. "So, you can have all these Barbadian experiences in a short space of time."



5 Reasons to Look for a Cruise to Barbados

1. Barbados boasts more than 70 miles of sun-saturated, palm tree-lined beaches, and the clear blue waters and year-round climate are always ideal for a day of relaxation or adventures.
2. This is the "Year of Culinary Experiences" in Barbados. Using a tantalizing blend of the old and new, Bajan cuisine brings together influences from African, Caribbean, West Indian and European traditional favorite dishes to create a unique and authentic culinary experience.
3. Events and festivals are ongoing all year. Perhaps the most impressive is the "Crop Over Festival," celebrating the end of the sugar cane harvest in July.
4. Barbados is recognized as the true birthplace of rum. First made 370 years ago from the island's robust sugar cane crop, Barbados rum found favor with English sailors who, as legend tells it, offered their bounty of rum as proof that they had crossed the Atlantic. In 1703, Mount Gay Rum began distilling the oldest brand of rum in existence, and you can still visit the distillery today.
5. Nine major airlines fly into Barbados' Grantley Adams International Airport, offering flexible travel options. You should aim to spend time on the island before or after your cruise, and Barbados offers a wide range accommodations to fit any budget or style -- including rustic beach houses, five-star hotels and luxurious private villas.