

CARIBBEAN

Three days in Barbados: Rum and water on 'The Rock'

BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON
Special to the Miami Herald

Five leatherback sea turtles circled me in 15 feet of water, their nimble and graceful underwater gliding belying their girth. They skimmed close, looking for handouts, giving me a chance to look into their soulful, wise eyes and touch their slick, barnacle-studded shells.

One of the giants gave me a lift: As it surfaced for air, it could not see me swimming above it and, unable to get out of its way, I got a brief turtle-back boogie-board ride. Gnarly, dude!

Swimming with leatherbacks was definitely a highlight of my three days on Barbados, an Eastern Caribbean island that the Bajans (the local name for the locals) refer to as "The Rock."

They also like to call it "the birthplace of rum." After three days, I'd had my share in the local rum shops, which they claim number one for every 160 members of the island's 280,000 population

TURN TOWARD
ECO-TOURISM

The turtle swimming experience demonstrated a trend new to Barbados tourism since I visited some dozen years ago. As one of Britain's most faithful and prosperous colonies during its plantation era, Barbados highly values its history, presenting visitors with countless opportunities to explore the past at plantation manors, fortifications, sugar mills, and museums.

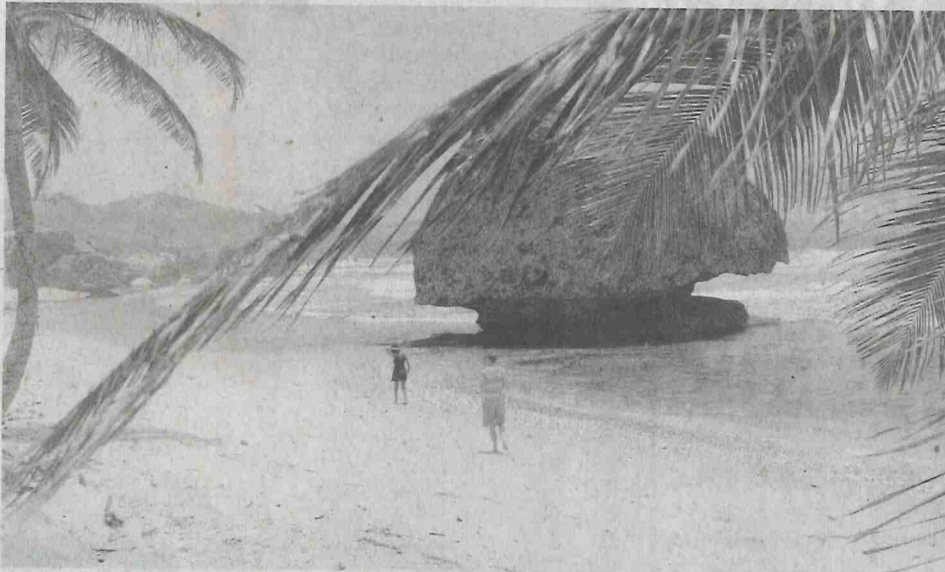
But today, as the touted west shore Platinum Coast sees its once-treasured beaches erode because of development on the north end, Barbados has come to value its environment and share it with visitors. Which it well should, because its green spaces and jewel-toned seas are stunning.

In the island's mid-section, caves, monkey-populated forests, and gardens appeal to nature-lovers. At its fringes, rocky cliffs and white-sand beaches beckon.

Most people gravitate to the leeward side of the island, where shoring and the building of paths still allow visitors to walk from sandy beach to sandy beach in front of the resorts and homes that face calm, clear seas.

• **Day One:** Exploring the Platinum Coast

I made my base at The Club Barbados, formerly the Almond Beach Resort. The



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BATHSHEBA BEACH: The 'Soup Bowl' is known for its limestone formations.

Almond name once attached to three important Barbados resorts, all of which have been sold. Club Barbados lies close to the heralded Sandy Lane Resort, where celebrities and royalty from the U.S. and England pay four figures a night for luxury rooms and coveted links.

More my price range, The Club Barbados, an adult all-inclusive, is still undergoing upgrades in the rooms, the best of which face the sea. It has its own upstairs version of a rum bar, its shelves lined with an impressive collection. Try the passion-fruit and mango rum punch.

The Club Barbados makes a handy headquarters for walking the strip to historic Holetown and its new designer shopping and entertainment center called Limegrove Lifestyle Centre. I preferred strolling through the chattel house shops village, small rum shops, and clubs district.

Here allow me to explain two institutions of strong Bajan tradition.

Chattel houses date back to post-emancipation days, when the freed slaves built their wooden homes to be moveable from job site to job site. Gingerbread-trimmed and colorful, they brighten the towns and countryside.

Rum shops, other than being a place to procure drink and often food, serve as a political forum and dominoes arena — when the patrons aren't listening intently to the broadcast of a cricket game, that is.

So with three days on the island, I would heartily recommend a few stops in the local rum shops with a side of water immersion.

Start with a walkabout on the beach path and main

roadway around Holetown. I began my explorations early morning at low tide so that I could wade through shallow waters to walk the sanctified beach at Sandy Lane, sequestered by jutting rocks.

Going the other direction from The Club Barbados, you must do a little maneuvering along a rugged pathway until you reach a paved walk that takes you past flowering vegetation, mansions, and stretches of beach en route to Holetown.

By day a shopping destination, Holetown has everything from duty-free jewelry to local art and Cuban cigars for sale.

By night its First and Second streets liven up with music and bistro dining. Some newly made friends and I hit Lexy Piano Bar after dinner at Zacchio's on the waterfront. The utmost entertaining owner, Broadway singer Alex Santoriello, gets the crowd pumped at Lexy.

The Mews and Elbow Room are other nightlife hotspots in town, especially come Friday and Saturday.

• **Day Two:** Expanding horizons

After enjoying the Holetown scene, plan the second day for an island tour to the east side. This will most likely take in the historic town of Speightstown, just up the coast from Holetown.

From there, the drive passes breathtaking scenery of sea, sugarcane fields, and black-bellied sheep at pasture.

Stop at Flower Animal Cave on the island's northernmost point for a view of limestone cliffs being battered by near-violent Atlantic waves. You can explore the cave, but many tour

guides don't recommend it. Walk the cliff-top path instead, have a cold drink at the café, and visit the chattel shops and artisan stands.

Then it's time for a rum shop stop. It was for me anyway.

The rum shop in the town of Bathsheba may be my favorite in all of Barbados. It looks out on the "Soup Bowl" beach known for its surfing and limestone formations.

In Bajan rum shops, if you want rum and coke, you buy a mini or flask bottle of rum and a bottle of Coke. The bartender gives you some ice. Bajans typically drink the rum with only a small squirt of cola.

I ordered a rum punch, because in my estimation, no one makes rum punches like they do in Barbados. The recipe follows the classic rhyme: one of sour (lime juice), two of sweet (simple syrup), three of strong (rum, of course), and four of weak (water and ice). A dash of Angostura bitters and grated nutmeg, and it's complete.

En route to Bathsheba, rum-lovers may want to stop in at Nicholas Abbey. The 350-year-old plantation manor produces its own small-batch rum for visitors to sample as part of the tour.

If you're game for a taxi ride to the island's most highly touted after-dark rummy scenes, head either to the locals' party known as Fish Fry in Oistins or to the smart clubs of St. Lawrence Gap. Local "boogie" buses will take you there for a few Bajan dollars (tied to the American dollar — two Bajan to one American).

• **Day Three:** Capital Bridgetown and swimming with turtles

The following day I took

Going to Barbados

Getting there: American Airlines flies nonstop twice a day from Miami to Barbados in about 3 1/2 hours. Roundtrip airfare starts around \$615 in early December. There are no nonstops from Fort Lauderdale, and the quickest trip with a connecting flight takes almost 15 hours.

Barbados Food & Wine and Rum Festival: Nov. 22-25, www.foodwinerum.com. Special demonstrations, tours, cruises, and parties throughout the island.

Information: www.visitbarbados.org

WHERE TO STAY

Barbados Beach Club, 246-428-9900, www.barbadosbeachclub.com. Those serious about their rum-swilling and nightlife may look to stay on the southern coast, near St. Lawrence Gap and Oistins. All-inclusive, it packages all meals, drinks, and snorkeling and kayaking equipment use into its daily rate, which starts at \$225 in the off-season and \$267 in high season.

The Club Barbados, 866-317-8009, www.theclubbarbados.com. Its 161 rooms and suites huddle around a palm-lined beach and rocky lagoon pool area. Full-service and all-inclusive, its meal options range from buffet breakfast and lunch to table service dinner in the main dining room and Bajan-style Enid's Restaurant. Double room rates in off-season start at \$690; \$790 in season; use of watersports equipment is included; spa treatments are extra.

Sandy Lane Resort, 246-444-2000, www.sandylane.com. The gold standard for Platinum Coast resorts, it boasts the most beautiful stretch of beach in the region, plus three golf courses and top luxe rooms. There are also tennis, plenty of dining options, a kids club, and a spa. Off-season rates start at \$1,100; \$3,250 in season; and include use of non-motorized watersports equipment, full breakfast, airport transfer and other amenities.

WHERE TO EAT

Staying at an all-inclusive resort meant I didn't sample the local restaurants to the extent I have in the past, but here are some local favorites I can recommend.

Brown Sugar, Bridgetown; 246-426-7684; www.brownsugarbarbados.com. Known for its planter's buffet lunch, it specializes in native Bajan foods such as cou-cou (a polenta-like okra dish), fish cakes, breadfruit and flying fish. Lunch buffet \$28, dinner entrees \$20-\$36.

The Fish Pot Restaurant, Shermans; 246-439-3000; www.littlegoodharbourbarbados.com/restaurant.html. Besides the seafood you'd expect to see on the menu, people flock to this seaside spot for creative curry, steak and pasta dishes for lunch and dinner. Dinner entrees \$23-\$49.

Zaccio's, Holetown; 246-432-0134; zaccios.com. Another waterfront, casual spot that is among the coast's more affordable options for seafood, pizza and Greek specialties. Open lunch and dinner; pizza and dinner entrees \$15-\$30.

a taxi to capital Bridgetown. Despite the fact that a cruise ship was in port, I found the town to be more islanderservicing than touristy, just as I had remembered.

I walked the pedestrian and vehicular bridges that gave the city its name, explored the riverside craft market, and walked the streets admiring the churches and peeking into a few shops. I was wishing for more time in the vicinity to hit Brown Sugar Restaurant, my favorite for local cuisine, and to make another visit to the Mount Gay Distillery, the Caribbean's oldest.

But the turtles were calling me in a sea-transmitted telepathy that watered

down my appetite for rum. The Club Barbados offers the short cruise northward to Turtle Bay daily, and I did not want to miss the boat.

The fact that the boat captains throw fish in the water to attract the turtles may be a little less than environmentally correct, but it does the trick.

Eventually five super-sized leatherbacks (they can grow to be nine feet long) circled the boat with our group of snorkelers. The experience was so overwhelming, one woman cried. Most of us giggled in sheer delight at interacting with such an ancient and endearingly enduring species.