

ISLAND DREAMS

You can't move for news of luxury hotels in the Middle East, Asia and the Indian Ocean, but can the Caribbean compete with this new breed of swanky properties? *Philippa Jacks* finds there's plenty of luxury life left in this old favourite



Take a look

down Conde Nast's Gold List 2008 and you'll find the Caribbean conspicuous by its almost total absence. The list names the best 20 or so hotels in six different categories. Sandy Lane, Carlisle Bay and a few other Caribbean properties made it into the bottom half of some lists, but there were none at all in the "Ambiance and Design" or "Food" categories.

Of the 440-plus properties featured by Small Luxury Hotels of the World, only 15 are in the Caribbean, and of the Leading Hotels of the World's almost 450 hotels, there are only 19 in the region. As one of the longest-serving destinations for the luxury traveller, is this not cause for concern? Have African lodges and Maldivian islands hammered the nail in the Caribbean's luxury coffin?

Certainly not, says the Caribbean Tourist Organisation's director of marketing, Julia Hendry. "The luxury sector has been particularly buoyant for us, and it would be nice to see more recognition of the raft of new openings, new spas and refurbishments we've had in the region."

And at this year's Caribbean Hotel Association Marketplace, luxury was the word on everybody's lips, with reports of high-end hotels in the pipeline all over the region. Especially striking was Ritz-Carlton's commitment to the Caribbean. The hotel group already has five properties there, but is investing several billion dollars in new openings in Turks and Caicos, Bahamas, the Dominican Republic and St Lucia over the next three years.

Ezzat Coutry, senior vice president at Ritz-Carlton, says it's one of the company's fastest growing regions outside Asia. "It's emerged as a viable and sought-after destination by luxury travellers globally," he explains. "Investors and developers are targeting the region and seeking to collaborate with our brand."

Storm over nothing

Alec Sanguinetti, director general of the CHA, spoke at Marketplace of his concern that overall tourism to the Caribbean is growing at only 1% a year, compared to 6 or 7% globally. Yet CTO figures show that visitors from Europe were up by 5% last year. The CTO took a stand at December's International Luxury Travel Market for the first time, and was very encouraged by the response.

UK operators also confirm that the region continues to perform well, despite the popularity of the Indian Ocean, Far East and Middle East. Suzanne Walford, Caribbean product manager at Carrier, says: "Other destinations did boom, but this was not to the detriment of our Caribbean business last year. The weak dollar and the fact that the Caribbean is seen as a relatively safe destination have contributed to its continued success."

Barbados, Antigua and St Lucia remain the best selling islands for luxury

operators like Carrier. And ITC Classics, which started life as Caribbean Connections in the 1970s and was instrumental in starting the trend for flying Concorde to Barbados, claims its heart is still in the island. "Barbados and villas is where we really started," says chairman Drew Foster. "Flights out to Barbados were probably more expensive then than they are now."

Barbados has many well-established properties like Sandy Lane and The Crane – the kind to which clients return year after year. Even Michael Winner, who came down with food poisoning at Sandy Lane over Christmas 2006, still went back to the hotel the following year as normal.

But repeat clients looking for something new will be pleased to hear there's a Banyan Tree planned for 2009 on the island and a Four Seasons on its way.

Antigua's Carlisle Bay created a real stir with its minimal chic when it opened in 2003. Hodge's Bay Club, which opens in October, is a similarly sophisticated property, while Hermitage Bay does boutique brilliantly.

St Lucia has also seen much-needed investment. Jade Mountain, which recently opened at Anse Chastanet is genuinely innovative, with spectacular views of the Pitons and curvy indoor-outdoor infinity pools. The Landings resort officially last December (see review on p59), and boutique Cap Maison is set to open this summer. With Raffles and Ritz-Carlton both on schedule for 2010, St Lucia will pack a hefty luxury punch. The launch of thrice-weekly direct British Airways flights this October will make the destination more accessible, too.

Below: Royal Plantation at Fowl Cay shows the new face of luxury in the Caribbean;

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The hot topic

But it was Turks and Caicos that created the biggest luxury buzz at this year's CHA. Amanyara, which opened on Providenciales in 2006, has brought the spacious, sliding-doored pavilion style of Asia to the Caribbean.

Parrot Cay has now been open for a decade, but it continues to impress – especially with brand-new villas designed by Donna Karan – and Grace Bay Club was renovated last year. Ritz-Carlton's Molasses Reef, its first ever "Reserve" property, will open at the end of the year on the undeveloped West Caicos island.

Carrier's Walford agrees that all these developments are significant. "It was Turks and Caicos that got me most excited at CHA, especially as the first of the new luxury resorts looks set to open by 2009 – a lot of the other new projects I was hearing about had dates of 2010 or 2011."

In the Bahamas, where CHA was held this year, there is much excitement about Ritz-Carlton's forthcoming Rose Hall project – a 230-acre private island with marina set to open in 2009. Sandals was also showcasing a private island resort, Royal Plantation at Fowl Cay in the Exumas. The resort has just a handful of Polynesian-style villas, surrounded by miles of stunning turquoise sea.

"Our general manager's from Australia and he says that, on its best day, the Great Barrier Reef can only aspire to this kind of clearness in the water," boasts Adam Stewart, chief executive of Sandals Resorts. "We're going to make it the most exclusive island in the Caribbean in the next three years."

But high-end hotels alone do not a luxury destination make. Can the Caribbean compete with the Middle East's world-class events and festivals? Petra Roach, vice president of marketing and sales for the Barbados Tourism Authority, is confident that Barbados already does. "Barbados is doing phenomenally well in terms of polo, for example," she says. "We've built three fields in the last two years alone." For 2008's Taste of Barbados festival, British celebrity chefs including Gordon Ramsay and Jamie Oliver have already been approached.

Getting spa savvy

The Caribbean has never really had the spa reputation of the Indian Ocean or Far East, but spa development it is now being taken much more seriously. CuisinArt on Anguilla has just invested US\$7 million into its Venus spa, and the first Dior Spa in the Caribbean opened at The Cliff on Dutch St Maarten a year ago. Any clients familiar with the Banyan Tree brand will know exactly what to expect from its new Bajan property when it comes to spas.

A reputation for slow or mediocre service is undoubtedly an obstacle that Caribbean tourism must overcome. The CHA's Sanguinetti says service levels might

be putting visitors off. "Service is critical, and it starts with education in the schools," he



Above: The infinity pools within the rooms at St Lucia's Jade Mountain add extra glamour

adds. "We're a place with a history of slavery, and it's about separating service from servitude."

Beverley Slocombe is leisure manager at Giles Travel in Buckinghamshire, and specialises in the Caribbean. She admits the service in the Caribbean is laid back and that it does impact upon where her high-end clients choose to go. "When people travel to the Far East and Oman, for example, they receive good service at much more competitive prices, and this is influencing their choice of destinations."

Colin Pegler, managing director of the marketing company for Elite Island Resorts and Occidental Hotels, is similarly realistic. "Service might be more polite in these areas, but in the Caribbean it's more fun. You don't get a waiter slapping you on the back and joking with you at breakfast in a hotel in Dubai."

Some properties are striving to raise the bar: Grace Bay Club is among hotels which have a director of guest experiences, for example. Frank Pierce, director of sales and marketing at Raffles Canouan Island in the Grenadines, says that having 550 employees for a 156-room property helps keep service levels up. "On certain islands there are problems because of the growth of the hotels and the shortage of qualified employees. We bring world management staff from our other properties around the world to train our local employees in the Raffles service standards," he says.

Luxury specialist agents will have chance to see if Raffles lives up to expectations when ITC Classics takes agents on a "thank you" trip to the resort in September, including a gala dinner at the luxury property.

"Raffles bit our hand off when we gave them chance to be involved," says ITC's Foster. "As a company, we struck on the resort right from the start, and it's always been a particular favourite of mine. It's the kind of island you dream about going to."

ITC might now be a worldwide operator, but the Caribbean is still more than 50% of its business. It therefore seems appropriate that the Caribbean should be the focus of the trip – a destination which has a special place in luxury travellers' hearts and shows every sign of holding firmly on to it.

EXPERT EYES



The Caribbean is one of our top selling destinations, and is increasing year-on-year. New development always keeps people interested in a destination, and the Caribbean has a very loyal customer base. I think the new

Mandarin Oriental property will be a great addition to the Turks and Caicos, as will Four Seasons and Banyan Tree going into Barbados, which is always a hot destination – its affinity with the UK is ageless. Antigua has really increased its appeal over the past few years with properties like Carlisle Bay and Hermitage Bay coming online. The charm of the Caribbean is that they want you to have a sense of place, instead of you having no idea what destination you are in once you're inside the hotel.

Caroline Beckett, Caribbean product manager, Seasons in Style



Places like the Far East might be perceived as "newer" destinations, but Barbados is like a home away from home. Our repeat factor for guests is incredible. We have Zagat-rated dining in Barbados, we have two luxury jewellers on resort,

and our own boutique. We're also seeing an increasing demand for luxury transportation, such as our Bentley service and helicopter transfers. There's a commitment to excellence, to a personalised service and continuous creativity which we think will keep Sandy Lane wowing our guests and ensuring our reputation as one of the world's premier properties.

Carl Henderson, general manager, Sandy Lane



The Caribbean makes up about 25% of my bookings; I sell a lot at the high end and also a lot of honeymoons. Yes, the service in the Caribbean is laid back, but you don't get the same fun factor anywhere else – the

barman making cocktails with a bottle of liquor on his head and that kind of thing. Ottley's in St Lucia is one of my favourite hotels – it's a family-run property and all the bedrooms are different. I've just sent a very good client to the new Discovery at Marigot Bay in St Lucia – that's been proving very popular. The Caves in Negril is stunning – just 11 stone cottages and very romantic. That's a place I'd love to go.

Jenny Jackson, Personal Travel Advisor, Beckenham, Kent



Luxury means different things to different people, but for a lot of our clients, the last word in luxury is somewhere like Eastwinds in St Lucia, which has just one small bar and swimming pool, or Palm Island in the Grenadines, which is just 37 cottages on a private island – simple, barefoot, very rustic. Our clients don't want the kind of service where they're fawned over and embarrassed and have their sunglasses polished every five minutes. Where the Caribbean wins is with natural, thoughtful and charming service.

Paul Cleary, managing director, Caribtours



There is definitely a demand for luxury hotels on Antigua and Barbuda – most of the hotels built in recent years like Carlisle Bay, Hermitage Bay, and Sandals Mediterranean Village appeal to the five-star sector. The luxury

traveller now demands more than just the beach, hence our slogan "the beach is just the beginning". Visitors want more active, eco-friendly holidays and are keen to experience the local culture. The main appeals for the luxury tourist are sailing, with Antigua Sailing Week and the Classic Yacht Regatta, diving, hiking, bird watching, cricket, cuisine and the pink and white sand beaches. The level of service they receive is on par with any other 4/5 star property in the world.

Carol Hay, director of tourism (UK and Europe), Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Authority

1. WESTIN ROCO KI BEACH & GOLF RESORT, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

starwoodhotels.com

What: This 157-room beachfront hotel is part of a larger development with private condominiums and villas. Facilities include a gigantic spa, six restaurants, six swimming pools and a golf course tipped to be one of the best in the Caribbean.

Where: The resort sits on a staggering two-mile stretch of beach, and is in the Punta Cana region of the island, 20 miles from the international airport. With Sanctuary Cap Cana just opening and the Ritz-Carlton Cap Cana coming in 2010, this part of the Dominican Republic is fast becoming a luxury hotspot.

Why go: The development is not small scale, so is one for clients who really value facilities and activities. The headland location of the golf course will wow the most seasoned golf player.

Who's behind it: The golf course was designed by Nick Faldo. The property will also have the Westin Kids Club that clients might recognise.

Opening: September. Rates will be available from April.

2. MOLASSES REEF, A RITZ-CARLTON RESERVE, TURKS & CAICOS

ritzcarlton.com

What: This environmentally-responsible resort has 125 rooms, three restaurants, a spa and marina. Properties will also be sold.

Where: The 11-mile long West Caicos island, previously uninhabited. It is six miles southwest of Providenciales.

Why go: Even with the hotel and 75 villas, this will still be a low-lying development with a feeling of seclusion. As the first property in Ritz-Carlton's new "Reserve" brand, there will be a real kudos in trying it out. Excellent diving, Catherine Lake and two national parks mean Molasses Reef will please outdoorsy clients.

Who's behind it: Menus will be created by award-winning Gray Kunz of New York's Lespinasse and Cafe Gray. Scott Lee of respected SB Architects is the designer.

Opening: Winter. Rates not available yet.

3. CAP MAISON, ST LUCIA

capmaison.com

What: A clifftop boutique property with 50 rooms and suites, all served by butlers. Will also have The Cliff restaurant, walk-in wine cellar, 'rummier' to advise on the best rum, spa, golf course and motor-yacht.

Where: Located within Cap Estate, a former sugar plantation, on the northern tip of St Lucia. The property has views of both the Atlantic and Caribbean seas and is close to lively Rodney Bay.

Why go: The 46ft motor-yacht to take guests on day or overnight trips is really special, and with only 50 rooms it will be a genuine boutique property. With other luxury hotels and vastly improved airlift on the way, St Lucia is coming to the fore.

Who's behind it: The property is being developed by a St Lucian family, with a Venezuelan-American architect and landscape gardening by an Englishwoman who has lived on the island for half a century and has landscaped many luxury resorts and residences on the island.



Opening: July. Caribtours offers seven nights at Cap Maison from £1,480 per person room only, staying in a deluxe garden view room. This price is valid for travel from September 1-25. All guests will receive a complimentary welcome massage and a complimentary dinner (excluding drinks) at The Cliff restaurant (caribtours.com)

4. HODGES BAY CLUB, ANTIGUA

hodesbayclub.com

What: This reasonably low-rise, discreet property comprises 114 rooms, with a range of grades from Club Suite up to Ocean Front Houses. It has three pools, a spa and a kids club.

Where: Located a couple of miles from St John's in the west of the island, a couple of miles from the international airport.

Why go: With its three restaurants and impressive chef credentials, Hodges Bay is a must-try for food-lovers. The concept at the main restaurant, Taboo, will be tasting menus of many small dishes.

Who's behind it: Executive chef Barnaby Jones was trained by three-Michelin starred chef Michael Bras. The resort is designed by Syntax, the architects behind Chiva Som in Thailand and many other hotel and spa projects.

Opening: October. Harlequin has seven nights from £1,583 per person in a Club Suite, including breakfast, flights from London with Virgin Atlantic and private car transfers. Valid October 12-December 6 (harlequinholidays.com)

5. VICEROY ANGUILLA RESORT & RESIDENCES, ANGUILLA

viceroyanguilla.com

What: A combination of a low-rise hotel rental villas, with a cliff-top restaurant, three pools, and spa with outdoor treatment rooms.

Where: It sits on 35 acres of beachfront land, on Mead's Bay in western Anguilla.

Who's behind it: Best-known for its hotels in Santa Monica and Palm Springs in the US, Viceroy is expanding with resorts and residences in Miami, Mexico and Colorado. Its parent company, the Kor Hotel Group, also owns Tides and Urban Retreats.

Why go: The property will have facilities such as tennis courts, without being too great in size. Views from the elevated spa and restaurant will be spectacular, and the extensive gardens will help keep it feeling secluded.

Opening: End of year. Rates not yet available.

6. WESTIN LE PARADIS ST LUCIA BEACH & GOLF RESORT, ST LUCIA

starwoodhotels.com

What: Another Caribbean project from Westin, this hotel is one phase of a larger resort. It will have 192 rooms, a Greg Norman golf course, pool, gym and several restaurants.

Where: On a mile of beach on Praslin Bay, half-way down the east coast of the island.

Who's behind it: Starwood and Westin, so familiar touches such as Heavenly Beds and Heavenly Baths will be incorporated.

Why go: At four storeys, it is one of the higher-rise new properties coming online, but as with Roco Ki, the cliff-edge golf course is spectacular.

Opening: September. Rates not yet available.