

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

CARIBBEAN

The Caribbean is a major component of Azura's maiden season, and with good reason, as it is one of the most beautiful regions on earth. Linda Jackson explores the islands and introduces us to the incredible array of creatures fortunate enough to call the islands home



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Within the wonderful mix of islands that make up the Caribbean, but secreted behind a screen of pristine white sand beaches, crystalline waters, endless sunshine and stunning sunsets, lies one of the most varied and well-preserved ecosystems on the planet – a living tropical paradise overflowing with colour and wildlife... from blue 'dragons', green monkeys, white-tailed deer, brown boobies and red howlers to chirping tree frogs, parrotfish, upside-down jellyfish, bee-sized birds and whistling ducks.

Not only is the region rich in history, it is also rich in surprises and houses a kaleidoscope of landscapes in which, just a stone's throw away from rows of sun beds, parasols and beach bars, you'll discover another side to the Caribbean – the wild side. White-browed, pink-muzzled monkeys in a lush rainforest perhaps; vivid marine life in multicoloured coral reef hotspots; and nesting turtles lying on black volcanic or pink coral sand beaches. Migratory bird traffic through the region is vast, the beautiful Caribbean skies being filled with the sounds and colours of these winged wonders, marine life is rich and varied, and there are myriad lizards of all shapes and sizes – some that are slow and short-legged, others speedy and long-legged, many with sticky toe-pads that dwell up high.

THE AWESOME ANTILLES

In an idyllic setting of crystal clear waters, pristine reefs and stunning powder soft white sand beaches, Grand Cayman is the largest of the three Cayman Islands, with a wealth of wildlife wonders just minutes from tourist trails. As the unique home to the giant blue iguana, Grand Cayman has a major conservation programme in operation to save them from extinction, breeding them in captivity and releasing them into the protected forests and gardens of the QE II Botanic Park where these magnificent iguanas roam freely. They range in colour from brown-grey to luminous blue and possess a blue dragon-like crest that runs the length of its entire body, up to almost 6ft.

Grand Cayman is consistently rated among the top diving sites in the world for its breathtaking wall dives, shallow coral reefs and rich marine life. But it's not necessary to dive for a surge of excitement: you can stand in 3ft of water on a sandbar in the middle of North Sound in 'Stingray City' to feed the southern stingrays; they will brush your legs and take tidbits from your hands. Kayaking through the central mangroves, the ecological heart of Cayman, is a tranquil way to search for green turtles, upside-down jellyfish, green herons and West Indian whistling ducks, but to spot the spectacular indigenous parrots and other birds in the wilderness, walk the Mastic

CRUISES VISITING THE CARIBBEAN



Aurora	R012	16 Oct 10	View
Arcadia	J020	15 Nov 10	View
Ventura	N101	14 Jan 10	View

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Reserve trail situated towards the East End of the island.

Blessed with stunning mountains, cloud-shrouded rainforests, breathtaking waterfalls and picturesque beaches, Jamaica is home to many fascinating endemic bird species, including the orangequit, the Jamaican tody, the greater owl, the Antillean bullfinch and the becard. The beautiful emerald green streamer-tailed hummingbird, also known as the doctor bird, is the national bird of Jamaica, whose whirring noise is distinctive when in flight and whose high-pitched noise is heard island-wide, from coastal plain to mountain. Jamaica's largest wetland area, Black River Morass, is a good birding spot where over 100 species have been sighted, while in the Rocklands bird 'sanctuary' – actually a small garden near Anchovy (a short taxi ride from Montego Bay) – hummingbirds, finches and bananaquits are tame enough to be handfed.

SIGHTS OF THE SOUTH

A complete contrast in scenery is in store on the island of Aruba: austere and yet stunning, the arid landscape is robust with cacti, aloe and (strangely contorted by the trade winds) divi-divi trees (watapana) which give shelter to an assortment of animals, from vividly coloured ruby-topaz hummingbirds to whiptail lizards and iguanas. The endangered burrowing owl has made its home on the island, and four keys in the southeastern part of Aruba (San Nicolas Bay Keys) provide major nesting sites for sooty terns and both black and brown noddies. Migratory birds in search of lush vegetation in which to nest find a haven in the Bubali Bird Sanctuary, a former saltpan but now an artificial freshwater wetland in which more than 80 species of migratory birds rest and breed; this is where brown pelicans and cormorants dive for food in the deep water, and where snowy egrets and scarlet ibis settle for the evening.

Another large bird, the West Indian flamingo, is evident year-round on Curaçao, which offers a remarkable variety of beaches, from long sandy stretches to rocky coves surrounded by massive cliffs. This is a chalk-cheese type of island, with a vibrant east and an arid wild west, where, excepting the endangered white-tailed deer and several species of bats, wildlife is abundant: endemic to the island, whiptail lizards in all colours and sizes can be found basking in the sun everywhere, while 168 bird species have been recorded here and four types of turtles are common in its waters.

LIFE ON THE LEEWARDS

Hawksbill and green turtles, both endangered species, also nest on the beaches of Antigua, where the females lay eggs several times each year. These turtles weigh as much as 175lbs (roughly 80kg) when mature and can grow to around 3ft long. Antigua boasts one of the most beautiful natural harbours in the world, as well as the longest barrier reef in the Caribbean. The Cades Reef marine reserve is a popular snorkelling area where turtles might well be spotted alongside barracuda, stingray and a variety of reef fish. You'll find snorkelling heaven in Tortola – an island peppered with coves and isolated beaches, powder white sand beaches and lush mountains – in the picturesque and peaceful British Virgin Islands; Brewers Bay is home to incredible species such as barracuda, stingrays, octopus, sergeant majors and schools of trumpet fish.

St Kitts meanwhile is an unspoilt island with dramatic volcanic peaks that dominate the landscape. Venture into its interior to discover a dense rainforest echoing with the sounds of birds and monkeys, and into South Friars mangrove swamp for a variety of wildlife – crabs, monkeys, egrets, herons and plovers. Majestic great frigate birds soar high over the nearby island of St Maarten, while egrets and pelicans are evident island-wide – just as they are on the analogous island of St Thomas in the protected Mangrove Lagoon Wildlife Sanctuary & Marine Preserve.

THE WILD WINDWARDS

Wildlife in the Windward Islands is especially diverse. Endangered hawksbill and green turtles can be seen at Freshwater Bay on the west coast of Barbados, and mischievous green monkeys, originally from Senegal and the Gambia, reside in gullies that criss-cross the coral island. As infants mature, their fur thickens and turns to a brown-grey colour with yellow and olive green specks, the resulting overall green hue being the reason for the name.

A visit to Grand Etang Forest Reserve, high up in the often mist-shrouded

mountains of Grenada, is a great way to get acquainted with the island's natural beauty. The lush rainforest is home to a rich diversity of fauna including the shy, white-browed and pink-muzzled mona monkey, opossums, mongooses and nine-banded armadillos. Its verdant vegetation provides shelter too for many species of birds... the 'gree-gree' (broad-winged hawk), the purple-throated carib, the little doctor bird (Antillean crested hummingbird) and the soursop (Lesser Antillean tanager). In Grenadian waters, with a high sighting rate December to April, about 15 species of whales can be seen.

Known as the 'Nature Island', mountainous Dominica is a gem and April no better time to be there to see nursery groups of female sperm whales with their young calves. You'll also see pygmy and pilot whales, and bottlenose, spinner and pantropical spotted dolphins. In the rainforest are intriguing creatures like the endangered mountain chicken (a kind of frog), the agouti (a sort of cross between rat and guinea pig) and two indigenous species of parrot.

In the lush mountains and valleys of the interior of St Lucia – an island that possesses a topography and ecology hard to match – in areas such as the Bois d'Orange Swamp, Boriel's Pond and the vast National Rainforest, visitors can observe some of the island's rare and beautiful birds: the brightly hued jacquot (St Lucia parrot), the white-breasted thrasher, the St Lucia peewee, the St Lucia wren and the St Lucia oriole. Sperm whales and false killer whales are regularly seen in St Lucian waters (humpback and Bryde's whales occasionally) as well as spinner and pantropical dolphins, and from May to August endangered leatherback turtles nest on the island's beaches – Grande Anse Beach being the centre of activity.

Visiting the West Indies at any time is a great privilege and a wonderful opportunity to discover the common and indigenous species that roam the land, sea and air on a number of the beautiful islands of the Caribbean – not only one of the world's most idyllic destinations, but also one of nature's finest accomplishments.

This article has been previously published elsewhere. All information was checked at the time of its original publication.