Island Fever

FROM THE DUTCH CARIBBEAN TO AMERICA'S OWN VIRGIN ISLANDS, FIND YOUR FAVORITE SPOT ON THE BEACH AND GET READY FOR SEA, SUN AND SERIOUS FUN.

So, how do you come to an island with a fixed budget and get a taste of everything it has to offer? If you're in the Bahamas, it's easy breezy. Need to get the most bang for your buck? Head to Comfort Suites, a family- and pocket-friendly hotel that not only has its own pool and dining areas but is also the only hotel that has an access deal with world-famous Atlantis. For only around $140 per night, you can take a short walk over to Atlantis and indulge in all manner of inappropriate activities. Tip: Ask for one of the newly upgraded rooms, and make use of the laundry facilities in each wing (comfortsuites.com).

Got a few more dollars in hand? Take a day trip to Blue Lagoon Island, and in between dosing in hammocks next to clear turquoise water, get dolphin kisses and seal hugs galore (bahamasblueagoon.com). Make a reservation at Graycliff, which delivers on a knockout combo of stylish Ital
ish Italian-influenced digs—courtesy of winningly entertaining owner Enrico Garzaroli, who, if you’re lucky, will stop by to say hi—and sublime food (the collection of 275,000 bottles of wine doesn’t hurt). Ogle the exquisitely tiled, humongous pool before indulging in a top-of-the-line cigar, theatrically hand rolled for your pleasure right in front of your eyes (graycliff.com). Spend your nights at the Sheraton, which has the largest beachfront area on colorful Cable Beach, and put a visit to swim-up bar Edgewater on your daily must-do list (sheraton Nassau.com).

Trust fund burning a hole in your pocket? It’s time to go all out with a suite at Atlantis—ask for the Sapphire Suite, which includes a luxurious living room, inviting tub, shower that functions as a personal sauna and, most important, a birds-eye view of the adults-only pool area. Put aside an evening to dine at Café Martinique, helmed by renowned chef Jean-Georges and located on Paradise Island, a busy square with charming shops and passersby in anything from shorts to sequins (atlantis.com). Explore the mysteries of the ocean with the studly and skillful men of High Seas Private Excursions, who will take you on a charter to private Rose Island, and make sure you don’t ever have to step out the water to have your drinks refilled. Snorkeling stops are included, and with the soft voice of Bob Marley wafting through speakers, every little thing, indeed, will be all right (highseasbahamas.com).

**ST. MARTIN**

In the dark Caribbean night, small lights wind around the palm trees at Kali’s beach bar next to colorful red, gold and green tables and chairs. A reggae band is setting up, and just feet away, the dark water of the Caribbean sea slaps gently against large rocks. As the wind blows through the trees, light, well-seasoned swordfish fritters and potent ti-punch, made with rum and sugarcane juice, are ideal companions for the scene’s relaxing vibe. In the daylight, acclaimed artist Roland Richardson’s portraits of local people, himself included, come alive. Known for his plein air paintings, the bright-eyed artist demonstrates his skills in the gallery’s 19th-century creole townhouse (rolandrichardson.com). Indulge in a wine tasting in a stone cellar with wooden drawers full of different labels and vintages at La Samanna’s Le Cave, where up to 15 guests of the resort, or just true oenophiles, can have a five-course meal with carefully selected wine pairings (around $380), or opt for the fresh lobster dinner and dessert du bombardier with coffee-cardamom ice cream at Le Reserve restaurant (lasamanna.com). Relax at Wâkawa on Pinel Island and have a luscious platter of lobster, trigger fish and shrimp with seasoned yellow rice and a cool glass of rose at Karabuni before taking a dip in the clear green Caribbean Sea (visitpinel.com).

Where to stay: La Samanna

Whether you’re drawn to the hammocks scattered under balconies in the luxurious main resort or opt for the private, ultra-plush villas with multiple Italian marble bathrooms and stairs, your biggest decisions will involve sand, sea and succulent food (lasamanna.com).

Where to play: Loterie Farm

Go on a hiking tour around the privately-owned 135-acre nature reserve, take a ziplining shortcut (there’s even one for the kids’ course), then get naughty with a Sex in the Tree cocktail and delicious bites at the scenic Tree Lounge (loteriefarm.net).

Secret treasure: Guavaberry Liqueur

Well, it’s not exactly a secret to enthusiastic locals, who sometimes brew their own versions, but it will be your favorite discovery on an island full of favorite things (guavaberry.com).

Deals and steals: Browse online sites to get a great hotel and air deal to Saint Martin, ensuring that you’ll be able to afford the island’s unique high- and low-end mix when it comes to accommodations, cuisine et al.
ARUBA

Passing rows of cacti and dry brush inland, I think I’m in some Nevada desert; the abundance of casinos also helps to draw the parallel. But then, detouring through Palm Beach and South Beach, two cosmopolitan strips filled with al fresco dining, bars, shops, nightclubs and lively crowds, I think I’m in Miami. But before completely losing my bearings, I eventually settle down on a beach lounger between the unmistakable super-soft sands and brilliant blue waters of the Caribbean. Yes, this is Aruba. The culture is quite a blend. As part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Dutch is the primary language, as well as Papiamento, a creole of Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and English (although everyone I encountered spoke English). Naturally, every meal I ate spoke with influence also: Dutch breads and cheeses, Caribbean favorites like fungi (similar to polenta) and fish stews and, of course, the American traditions like burgers and fries.

Where to stay: Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino
The resort has loads of dining choices from a sushi counter to a sports bar, and it has the largest casino on the island (arubamariott.com).

Where to play: MooMba Beach
This outdoor beach bar and restaurant cranks out food, drinks and music until 11 p.m. But it’s also where you can pick up a game of beach tennis—a growing international hit sport (moombeach.com).

Secret treasure: Zeerover
Not for picky eaters, this popular local seafood joint has no menu. Whatever they catch for the day is what comes to your table in large steaming baskets (297-584-8401).

Deals and steals: Tradewinds Club at the Marriott
For an upcharge to the basic booking rate, club guests get exclusive accommodations, private beach seating, complimentary breakfast, refreshments, evening open bar, free Internet and printing stations and other special perks. However, check tradewinds.arubamariott.com for their specials and discount booking codes.

ST. CROIX

I’m enveloped in a warm, velvety breeze and the sounds of steel pan drums the moment I walk outside the Rohlsen airport on St. Croix. It’s time for the 40th annual Agriculture and Food Fair, the main attraction. But of course the largest of the U.S. Virgin Islands has much more to offer. Even in a weekend, you can cover plenty. View an aquatic-inspired art exhibit, walk the grounds of the Whim Plantation and take to the cobblestone streets of Christiansted to admire the Danish architecture.

But don’t forget the Food Festival! I indulge in a bevy of West Indian delicacies from johnny bread to stewed snapper, callaloo, pumpkin fritters and peanut punch. No matter what you eat, leave room for a slice of six-layer Vienna cake packed with pineapple, guava and mint jelly. Divine! I return to the States wistful, renewed and dreaming about that phenomenal cake.

WHERE TO STAY: Enjoy sweeping views of the ocean and a boatload of amenities at The Buccaneer, a spacious and luxurious 138-room family-owned beach resort (thebuccaneer.com).

WHERE TO PLAY: Hop on an ATV and go off-roading on secluded tropical trails in the rainforest (geckosilandadventures.com).
Secret treasure: Snorkel underwater grottos off the coast of Buck Island, located 5 miles from St. Croix (www.bigbeards.com).

DEALS AND STEALS: Feeling adventurous? Get the inside track on how to save $450 on a dive trip to the U.S. Virgin Islands (usvigetaway.com/dive).
Welcome to Fantasy Island,” is the greeting I receive upon arrival at the comfortably modern Landings Resort on St. Lucia, and its cozy villas and delectable delights (like The Beach Club’s Chef Pat’s homemade pumpkin chutney) and the lush Garden of Eden-esque island promises to fulfill my every tropical wish (landings.rocksresort.com). For a little action and breathtaking views, try the zipline at Rain Forest Adventures (rainforestadventure.com). And take in the sights: the scenic Piton twin peaks, best seen from a boat out on the water; a therapeutic mud bath in the natural springs of the still-active volcano in Soufrière (the sulfur smell is intense, but for relief of minor aches and ailments, the olfactory assault is worth it); friendly bartering for authentic local crafts at the Castries Market; or just grab a hook or some snorkeling gear and while away your time at the beach.

WHERE TO STAY: The ultra-luxe Jade Mountain, with its open-air suites (jademountainstlucia.com), or the Coco Palms, with its authentically relatable air and exclusive swim-up suites ($300 per night; cocoresorts.com).

WHERE TO PLAY: Rodney Bay (rodneybay.net) for nightlife.

SECRET TREASURE: The Jazz Festival in May (stluciajazz.org).

DEALS AND STEALS: TOTAL ROMANCE PACKAGE
Book 5 nights, get the 5th night FREE, or 7 nights, and get 2 nights FREE! Includes: Airport transfers, meals, and activities (volcano tour, Sulphur Springs bath, Swedish massage, Jungle Biking, water sports, half day sailing) and more! 1-800-223-1108; ansechastanet.com/promotions.html