

■ Top Ten

Caribbean Islands of 2010

The Caribbean is eternally appealing, but even more so this year with new nonstop flights, plum hotels popping up on emerging islands, and unheard of bargains at pricey hideouts. From classic retreats (we're looking at you, Jamaica) to blissfully obscure isles, here are the top destinations to check out this year. BY ARABELLA BOWEN



A cottage on Petit St. Vincent, a private island retreat within the Grenadine chain

1 St. Vincent and the Grenadines

◀ Before St. Vincent served as the setting for *Pirates of the Caribbean*, this remote island and the whole Grenadine chain was primarily known only to sailors and seclusion-seeking rock stars (Mick Jagger and David Bowie discreetly frequent the exclusive Grenadine island of Mustique). These days, however, the even-prettier, quiet island of Bequia is on the rise, thanks to buzz about newcomer Firefly Plantation Bequia and the halfway complete Bequia Beach Hotel. Canouan Island already boasts a sprawling, superluxe Raffles resort that evokes the South Pacific (see p. 78 for an exclusive offer). And lush St. Vincent is touching up its popular sights like the panoramic Belmont Lookout and the canopied Vermont Nature Trail. What's more, JetBlue's new non-stop flights to Barbados, the unofficial gateway to the Grenadines, makes them (somewhat) easier to reach.

VALUE Overlooking Bequia's spectacular Friendship Beach, the **Bequia Beach Hotel** has already opened two restaurants, a pool, six villas, and 25 colonial-style rooms and suites, many of them with handsome four-poster beds. *From \$180/night; bequiabeach.com*

SPLURGE On the private island of Petit St. Vincent, or PSV, **Petit St. Vincent Resort** has 22 stone-clad one-bedroom cottages, all blissfully unplugged. For every guest there are two friendly staff members. Request cottage No. 6 for utter privacy and an outdoor shower. *From \$1,020/night, all inclusive, through March 12; psvresort.com*

2 Curaçao

True, Curaçao has historically trailed its sister islands of Aruba and Bonaire when it comes to attracting vacationers, largely because oil refining and financial services, rather than tourism, dominate its prosperous economy. Yet clearly some repositioning is afoot: Four new resorts have opened here in the past year alone (including a Renaissance and Hyatt Regency); Lodge Kura Hulanda & Beach Club unveiled a treehouse "mansion"; and the Avila Hotel introduced 68 more rooms. In November, American Airlines added a second daily flight to Curaçao from Miami. Before the secret gets out, go explore its capital of Willemstad, whose dozens of brightly colored Dutch colonial buildings comprise a UNESCO-protected district.

VALUE Newer hotels may have arrived, but **Hotel Kura Hulanda Spa & Casino** (not to be confused with its sister Beach Club property), whose 80 unique rooms are housed in historic Dutch colonial buildings, is still the island's—if not the Caribbean's—most memorable overnight. *From \$125/night through April 3; kurahulanda.com*

SPLURGE The 350-room **Hyatt Regency Curaçao Golf Resort, Spa and Marina**, opening March 1 on a sand-trimmed natural preserve, will constitute the island's first full-scale beach resort. Expect an 18-hole Pete Dye-designed golf course, three pools, and a full spa. *From \$219/night until June 1; curacao.hyatt.com*

3 Jamaica

Those who've steered clear of Jamaica because of its spring break vibe should reconsider. Last fall, JetBlue, Delta, US Airways, and AirTran launched nonstop flights from various U.S. cities (including New York, Phoenix, Atlanta, Orlando, and Baltimore), making the island easier than ever to reach. Book a cheap fare, ignore the captain's exhorter to "race to the beach!" and deplane to one of the island's distinctive boutique hotels. Island Outpost's legendary Goldeneye, aka Ian Fleming's onetime private estate, will reopen later this year with 11 new cottages and a beachfront restaurant. Several cool cliffside resorts in Negril provide a laid-back alternative to the Montego Bay fray further up the coast. And the oft-maligned city of Kingston is experiencing a makeover, centering on the aptly named New Kingston neighborhood northwest of the downtown. Here the capital's first new hotel in 40 years, the smart 107-room Spanish Court Hotel, opened in June with a hip rooftop bar.

VALUE Offering one of best deals in the Caribbean, Negril's **Rockhouse** presents 34 thatch-roofed units and a new spa in a terrific cliffside setting. *From \$160/night, rockhousehotel.com*

SPLURGE Check out Kingston's new scene from the plush vantage of **Strawberry Hill**, a 12-cottage compound run by Island Outpost on a former coffee plantation in the Blue Mountains beyond the capital. *From \$295/night through April 19; islandoutpost.com/strawberry_hill*

4 Grenada

This southern Caribbean island last made U.S. headlines in 1983 when Ronald Reagan invaded it to quell a Marxist military coup. Since then, mostly Brits have trod its 50-odd beaches, making it a great choice for American sunseekers who'd rather not run into their neighbors on the sand. A nascent resort-spa scene is one reason to visit now—three luxe options have debuted here since 2008. Other attractions include Grenada's capital, St. George's, which cascades down around a handsome port known as the Carenage, and the island's bustling markets, where one can purchase some of the dozen-plus domestically produced spices. The island is also home to the Caribbean's oldest waterwheel-powered distillery, River Antoine Rum Distillery, whose namesake Rivers Rum is a doozy 152-proof libation too flammable to bring home by plane.

VALUE Above-average perks, like gratis spa treatments, one-tank dives, and even archery and fencing lessons, come standard at adults-only **LaSource**, a 100-room resort on Pink Gin Beach. *From \$361/night per person, all inclusive, through April 8; theamazingholiday.com*

SPLURGE Boho-chic **LaLuna** has 16 large one- and two-bedroom cottages, each outfitted with a plunge pool. Guests meander between beachfront yoga classes, an open-air lounge for watching sunsets, and a fab new Balinese spa. Dining at its superb Italian restaurant is a highlight of any stay. *From \$775/night through April 9; laluna.com*

Top Ten



7 Anguilla

Exclusive Anguilla, with its powdery white-sand beaches, gourmet restaurants, and refined resorts and villas, has long been the quiet alternative to St. Barts. The last 12 months brought the arrival of the slick Viceroy Anguilla (the brand's first Caribbean outpost); a major makeover of stylish Cap Juluca; and the debut of an expanded spa at CuisinArt Resort. At the same time, the global recession crimped the return of visitors to its shores. The result? Off-season rates plummeted by more than 50 percent at some hotels, a trend we expect to continue this year. For those who have their hearts set on high season (which lasts until April), hotels are adding loads of perks (champagne at Viceroy; upgrades at Cap Juluca) in lieu of lowering rates.

VALUE It's all about location at **Kú**, an all-suite boutique hotel (with a happening bar scene) on Shoal Bay, one of Anguilla's best beaches. While the 27 shabby-chic rooms could use an upgrade, they're quite spacious, especially the top-floor quarters with pitched West Indian roofs. Request a room away from the bar to sleep in peace. *From \$315/night till April 4; ku-anguilla.com*

SPLURGE Along Rendezvous Bay, the 93-room all-white **CuisinArt Resort and Spa**, owned by the eponymous kitchen-gadget company, evokes visions of a tropical Santorini. Highlights include the spa, two Mediterranean restaurants serving homegrown fare, and a delightful beach bar with frosty cucumber-and-sage martinis. *From \$740/night until April 3 (\$590/night with a five-night Winter Breaks special); cuisinartresort.com*

5 Antigua

Antigua has a bit of everything: historic forts, picturesque harbors, 365 beaches, and several sumptuous hotels. Nearby lie the islands of Montserrat and Barbuda, ideal for day trips. Jumby Bay, on a 300-acre island 2 miles off the coast, happens to be one of the Caribbean's most reachable private-island resorts. The storied retreat, part of Rosewood Resorts, is fresh off a revamp that debuted an open-air spa, 40 redesigned guest rooms, and two restaurants. Continental and American Airlines fly nonstop to Antigua from East Coast cities, and a private catamaran deposits guests right on the resort's dock.

VALUE Notable newcomer hotel **Sugar Ridge** opened in late 2009 on a hillside overlooking Nevis and St. Kitts. Its 60 well-appointed rooms are furnished with seaview balconies and most have canopy beds. *From \$300/night for two through April 9 (see p.78 for an exclusive offer); sugarridgeantigua.com*

SPLURGE **Jumby Bay's** colonial-style rooms feature four-poster beds, wraparound terraces, private courtyards, and outdoor showers. Its new spa offers dreamy massages in a hammock. *From \$1,395/night per couple, all inclusive, through May 31; jumbybayresort.com*

6 British Virgin Islands

The pristine BVI has long attracted yachties and royalty to its turquoise waters, thanks to posh resorts like Rosewood Little Dix Bay, Sir Richard Branson's Necker Island, and Peter Island. This February, Branson rolled out *Necker Belle*, a 105-foot, four-cabin catamaran available for charter (with a three-person submersible for an extra fee). Nearby, the private island resort Scrub Island is slated to open on April 2 after several delays. On Tortola, two notable villas recently opened that bring the pricey region into reach: U.S. politico Lester Hyman's art-bedecked, three-bedroom private estate, Arundel Villa, and the elegant three-bedroom Frenchman's Paradise.

VALUE The **Frenchman's Paradise** villa features a gorgeous chef's kitchen, an open-air living room, and a pool with sweeping views of Sir Francis Drake Channel. Visitors can add amenities (such as private spa services) à la carte. *From \$3,500/week; frenchmanslookout.com*

SPLURGE The 100-room **Rosewood Little Dix Bay** opened in the 1960s on Virgin Gorda and its perfect strip of beach has hardly changed since. Look forward to spacious rooms (spring for the newer Rosewood Junior Suites), a cliffside spa, and three excellent restaurants. *From \$650/night; littledixbay.com.*



FROM TOP: The Estate House bar and restaurant at Antigua's Jumby Bay; a guest suite at the Viceroy Anguilla



10 Vieques

Since embracing tourism in 2003 after decades as a U.S. naval base, this tiny island 6 miles off the southeastern coast of Puerto Rico has been the most accessible "uncharted territory" in the Caribbean. With the island harboring more than 40 miles of unspoiled sand and the Caribbean's largest wildlife refuge, its small hotels and casual restaurants have attracted easygoing, eco-minded tourists. Thus the W Retreat & Spa, Vieques Island due to launch this spring is sure to stir things up. This marks the urban brand's inaugural Caribbean foray. Secondly, the W will host Alain Ducasse's first Caribbean restaurant, Mix on the Beach, a major culinary coup for the W. So if you're the sort to despair of a place being "discovered," plan a last visit this winter, before the new regime arrives in May. Otherwise, be among the first to sleep in W's new digs and sample what might be the most gourmet island cuisine this side of St. Tropez.

VALUE One of the Caribbean's most architecturally arresting hotels, **Hix Island House** has 13 spare, solar-powered loftlike apartments, with kitchenettes, indoor-outdoor living spaces, and dramatic cutout vistas. *From \$195/night through April 30; hixislandhouse.com*

SPLURGE On the island's north coast, the 157-room **W Retreat & Spa, Vieques Island** is accepting reservations for dates after May 1. Set on two private beaches, it will introduce boldly designed rooms (most with ocean views), a glitzy infinity pool, an outdoor fire pit, and an oceanfront spa. *From \$429/night till August 20; whotels.com*



FROM TOP: The island of St. Lucia is known for its mountainous topography; a guest room at the W Retreat & Spa, Vieques Island

8 St. Lucia

If recent happenings are any indicator, St. Lucia is poised to become the region's new culinary darling. Last year the discreet, hacienda-like Cap Maison welcomed award-winning chef Craig Jones, whose résumé includes stints at several British Relais & Châteaux hotels and St. Lucia's Royal Rex. Jalousie Plantation, which will become Tides Sugar Beach by the year's end, just tapped the chef at Tides Riviera Maya to helm its formal restaurant. Both The Landings and Jade Mountain recently added innovative agritours that allow guests to work on local farms and join fishing trips. In March, the British chocolatier Hotel Chocolat will open an eponymous six-room hotel on its 265-year-old working cocoa plantation. Thanks to a slew of nonstop flights from the U.S., weekend gourmets can sample the island's burgeoning table by lunchtime.

VALUE **Coco Palm** and its 83 casual West Indian-style rooms sit within walking distance of Reduit Beach and offer one of Rodney Bay's top lodging values. The best (and most expensive) "swim-up" suites have French doors that open right onto the pool. *From \$145/night till April 1; coco-resorts.com*

SPLURGE A decadent six-night Peak to Beach package combines three nights overlooking the Pitons at the legendary **Ladera Resort** and three nights in an oceanview villa at **Cap Maison**. *From \$6,000 a week for two, all inclusive, till March 31; capmaison.com*

9 Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic has probably built more resorts on its shores in the last decade than any other Caribbean island, but not all of them are the mass-market, all-inclusive type that catapulted the island to sun-and-fun fame in recent years. A recent trove of small hotels is putting that reputation to rest, which is a good news for U.S. beachgoers seeking a classy island escape close to home. The biggest rainmaker these days is the intimate Peninsula House that debuted in 2008 on the Samaná Peninsula, a less-developed area known for its exquisite beaches and small fishing villages. This season its new neighbor is the Balcones del Atlántico, an all-suites RockResort property that opens in February with a thatched-roof beach club perched over the sea. Further east, trailblazer Puntacana Resort & Club isn't idly standing by: This year it debuts two golf courses, including a Tom Fazio creation with six oceanfront holes.

VALUE The island's only Small Luxury Hotels of the World member, the 50-suite **Casa Colonial Beach & Spa Resort** near Puerto Plata still impresses some six years after its launch. Book 15 days in advance to save as much as 40 percent. *From \$255/night through April 3; casacolonialhotel.com*

SPLURGE The family-owned, art-filled **Peninsula House** is set in a Victorian mansion high above the beach. It offers just six junior suites and impeccable service. *From \$520/night; thepeninsula.com*