

Destination:

Caribbean



Carib connection

Palm-fringed breezes, scorching sunshine, reliable breezes – and lots and lots of rum – make the Caribbean a sailor's paradise. **Rupert Holmes** looks at cruising options...

The Caribbean offers sailing at its best – the climate is virtually perfect and the winds reliable, there's good shelter in the lee of the islands, and bigger winds and ocean swells for more adventurous sailing between island groups.

Most of the chartering in the region is in the Lesser Antillies – the chain of islands fringing the east of the Caribbean Sea, from the British Virgin Islands in the north to Trinidad and Tobago in the south. The BVIs have some of the easiest sailing in the area – part of the secret of their popularity, while sailing from St Martin/Sint Maartin the conditions are slightly more challenging. Although most of the main islands have seen considerable tourist development over the past 30 years, it's still easy to find smaller and more remote locations that are largely unchanged.

Picture lying at anchor off miles of palm-fringed beaches, enjoying a leisurely breakfast as

turtles swim past your boat. You have the option of snorkelling in crystal-clear waters over the reef fringing the bay, rewarded with a magnificent underwater kaleidoscope of multicoloured coral and shoals of brightly painted fish, or just carrying on and enjoying the sailing before mooring off another pristine shoreline beach with a backdrop of tropical rainforest.

In the evening you wander ashore for a restaurant meal under the stars. The food's great and the staff friendly – it might surprise you the first time they leave at the end of their shift, and ask you to help yourself to drinks and leave the money behind the bar... but don't worry, you'll soon get used to it. It's no wonder the Caribbean is such a favourite destination.

Trade winds usually give near-perfect breezes (Force 4-5) all year, although they tend to be a little stronger in the winter months, but weaker and less reliable in summer. Afternoon temperatures in winter range between 25-29°C and there are generally 22-23 dry days per month, with most rain falling as showers in late afternoon and evening. Summer tends to be a little wetter than winter with 15 or fewer dry days per month. At 31-32°C, summer temperatures are a little higher than in winter, but humidity can be very high at this time of year.

North of Trinidad and Tobago lies the North Atlantic hurricane belt, with the season lasting



Left From the larger islands such as Cuba to tiny archipelagos, the Caribbean offers a huge choice of destinations.

Inset left and below The British Virgin Islands are a sailor's paradise, whether cruising, doing a spot of dinghy sailing at the Bitter End (left) or enjoying the annual regatta (below).

Far left Palm trees and turquoise waters characterise most Caribbean anchorages.



PHOTO RUPERT HOLMES

bareboats alike in one of the Caribbean's most popular sailing events.

St Martin/St Maarten

St Martin/ St Maarten – dubbed the 'Friendly Island' – is 37 square miles of half-Dutch, half-French tropical paradise renowned for international gourmet cuisine, beaches and lively nightlife. It's a popular tourist destination with a large duty-free shopping area and more on-shore development than many islands, including casinos, numerous restaurants and boutiques.

Anguilla, a short distance north, is a lightly populated island surrounded by unspoiled coral reefs offering excellent snorkelling and diving, plus miles of soft white sand beaches. To the south is St Eustatius (Statia), one of the least developed islands in this part of the Caribbean, with a relaxed, chilled out pace of life. The island's national parks provide a protected habitat for endangered species including the rare Antillean iguana. Inland there's spectacular hiking, including a walk-in volcano, which rises in a perfect cone to 700m.

Antigua

There are direct flights from the UK to this long-standing favourite destination with well-developed facilities. With reputedly one beach



from June to the end of November. Activity peaks in September, with an average of one tropical storm a week forming in the region. While you're statistically unlikely to encounter a hurricane during your holiday, the temperature and humidity can make it hot, sticky and uncomfortable at this time of year.

Perhaps the best time of year for visiting the Caribbean is spring or early summer, when prices are lowest (winter is high season here) but the weather decent. January is another good time – the weather is at it's best, yet it counts as low season for many operators, presumably because few people choose to take holidays so soon after Christmas.

BVIs

This cruising nirvana is the most popular single charter destination in the Caribbean, with many charterers returning year after year for the islands' laid back sophistication and first-class sailing. Winds are reliable year-round, navigation is easy and there are numerous safe overnight stops. Stunning volcanic islands, with peaks cloaked in tropical rainforest, fringed both sides of the Sir Francis Drake Channel, giving this 30-mile long stretch of water good protection from Atlantic swells. There are numerous palm-fringed sandy beaches, while spectacular reefs and shipwrecks teeming with life offer some of the best diving and snorkelling in the Caribbean. In contrast, Anegada 20 miles to the north, is a coral island no more than 30ft above sea level, surrounded by miles of pristine white sand beach and extensive reefs.

Once ashore, choose between rustic beach bars or some of the best restaurants in the Caribbean. Just before Easter each year, the BVI Spring Regatta attracts top racers and



PHOTO HELEN FRETTEN/ASA



Regattas in the sun

The Caribbean is the spiritual home of the warm-weather regatta: there's nothing to beat the combination of tropical sun and cool, reliable breezes. A key feature of almost every Caribbean regatta is that everyone is welcome – ocean cruising families mix with the latest supermaxis and Sportsboats with chartered bareboats. You can also usually expect high standards of course design and race management.

Regattas are not solely about racing – the nightlife and entertainment ashore is just as important. Wherever you go, you can be assured of a carnival-like atmosphere.

Most regattas have large bareboat divisions (usually with the stipulation that the boat should be exactly as supplied for normal charter weeks). Often the competition in these classes is surprisingly keen, with top international sailors as well as local skippers battling it out. If you have the time, booking a fortnight's charter is ideal – one week can be spent cruising and soaking up the scenery, the other racing.

■ Antigua Sailing Week

This is the grandfather of them all, held in late April each year and preceded by the 65-mile Guadeloupe to Antigua race. The week takes competitors to various parts of the island each day. The event kicks off from English Harbour with the Dickenson Bay Race, while on subsequent days the various division rotates between Olympic-style courses and passages to other Antiguan harbours.
www.sailingweek.com

■ BVI Spring Regatta and Sailing Festival

Three days of non-stop racing and partying starting the week before Easter. There are divisions for racing yachts with spinnakers, cruisers without kites, plus charter bareboats and even beach cats. The Sir Francis Drake Channel, immediately outside the Nanny Cay Marina venue, provides a perfect stage for the regatta, with stunning scenery, steady winds and ample space for separate course areas for spinnaker and non-spinnaker classes. The event kicks off with the Sailing Festival; a low-pressure, three-day warm up. It consists of a 20-mile passage race to the Bitter End YC on adjacent Virgin Gorda island, followed by a

for every day of the year and numerous safe anchorages, Antigua offers varied itineraries along its rugged coast. Those wanting to explore further afield can head to the comparatively undeveloped island of Barbuda, 20 miles or so to the north, with its low-lying coasts and stunning beaches. The first week of May sees Antigua Race Week, when thousands of competitors from Olympic medallists to bareboat charterers flock to the island to enjoy a carnival atmosphere and serious on-water competition.

Guadeloupe

As with other French West Indian islands, Guadeloupe offers a distinctly Gallic welcome, as well as first-class restaurants and excellent provisioning. It's in effect two adjacent islands,

layday, and then a race back to Nanny Cay.
www.bvispringregatta.org

■ St Maarten Heineken Regatta

This event promises 'serious fun' for three days over the first weekend in March. Around 250 entries, ranging from beach cats through bareboats to Volvo Ocean Race entries are expected for the 2007 event.

Each night Heineken sets up a regatta village – with bars, food outlets and live bands – at a different location. For the first and last nights it's on the beach in Simpson Bay, near the St Maarten YC. On Friday it moves to the waterfront in Marigot (the capital of French St Martin) and on Saturday to Philipsburg, the Dutch capital.
www.heinekenregatta.com

■ Angostura Tobago Sail Week

Billed as 'the friendliest regatta in the Caribbean', Angostura Tobago Sail Week will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2007. The event is held over five days in early to mid-May, with a layday. There's racing in five classes, including one for bareboats, which account for roughly one quarter of the total fleet.
www.sailweek.com

■ Mount Gay/Boatyard Regatta, Barbados

This event, held in the home of Mount Gay rum, is organised by the Barbados Sailing Association in late May or early June, with typically about 30 yachts split into four classes: Racing, Cruising A, Cruising B and Charter, and lively evening entertainment.
www.sailbarbados.com
www.barbadosyachtclub.com

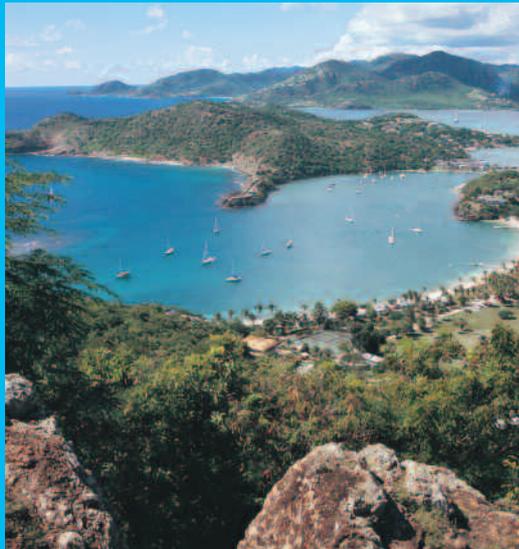
■ LaSource Grenada Sailing Festival

This four-day event has been ranked as one of the top five Caribbean regattas. Racing takes place over a variety of courses in late Jan or early Feb, including the Champagne Montaudon Pursuit Race. There are classes for: Racing, Cruising, Charter, Multihull and Fun. It is run at the same time as the National Workboat Regatta, which sees the colourful sight of 30 or more traditional Caribbean workboats pitted against each other.
www.grenadasailingfestival.com

Contact details

■ Cosmos Yachting, 0800 376 9070, www.cosmosyachting.com
 ■ Nigel James Yacht Charter, 44 (0)20 8568 8562, www.nj-yacht.com
 ■ The Moorings, 01227 776677, www.moorings.co.uk
 ■ Nautilus Yachting, 44 (0)1732 867445, www.nautilus-yachting.com
 ■ Sunsail, Reservations 023 9222 2222, Customer service 023 9222 2333, www.sunsail.com
 ■ Tenrag Yacht Charters, 44 (0)1227 721874, www.tenrag.com
 ■ Top Yacht Charter, 01243 520950, www.top-yacht.com

Above Antigua's Nelson Dockyard in English Harbour plays host to visiting cruising yachts as well as the annual regatta fleet.



separated by a narrow mangrove channel. Most of the population is found in the western Basse-Terre, which is dominated by mountain ranges, including the Lesser Antilles' highest peak, La Soufrière. The eastern wing is slightly smaller than Basse-Terre, and by comparison very flat. A little to the south is Dominica, one of the most unspoilt islands in the Lesser Antillies, with extensive national and marine parks. Alternatively, you can head north from Guadeloupe for more challenging sailing around Nevis and St Kitts.

Martinique

Martinique is one of the showcases of the French Caribbean, with its main towns displaying an abundance of French culture, style and sophistication. Other parts of this popular destination offer unspoiled fishing villages, flawless beaches – white sand on the south coast, black in the north – as well as secluded coves and reefs for swimming and snorkeling. The five-day Tour des Yoles Rondes in August is a sailing regatta featuring traditional Caribbean sailing boats as used by the local fishermen.

A short sail south from Martinique, St Lucia's lush natural beauty is home to both British and French cultural traditions – the two countries spent almost two centuries fighting over possession of the island. The twin volcanic peaks provide an opportunity to visit a 'drive-in' volcano and take a dip in the therapeutic sulphur springs. The large protected lagoon of Rodney

Left The Grenadines offer some of the most unspoilt sailing areas in the Caribbean, but are in the hurricane belt.



PHOTOS HELEN FRETTER /iStock

Bay is renowned as the finishing point of the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers – more than 200 arrive in the run up to Christmas, having sailed some 2,700 miles from the Canaries.

St Vincent and Grenadines

One of the most popular cruising areas in the Caribbean is the Grenadines, a chain of 32 islands between Grenada and St Vincent. Bequia, Mustique, Union Island and Cannouan are closely spaced and ideal for island-hopping with plenty of time to enjoy the spectacular snorkeling, beaches and laid-back beach bars and restaurants.

The stunning Tobago Cays national marine park consists of four deserted islands that can only be reached by yacht. They are protected by Horseshoe Reef, which offers some of the world's best snorkelling and diving, while the palm-fringed white sand beaches are equally spectacular.

Grenada

The Grenadines can also be explored by sailing north from Grenada. Even better, perhaps, is to take a one-way charter, noting that St Vincent to Grenada is predominately downwind sailing, especially during the winter months, while the return journey will involve more upwind work.

Grenada remains relatively unspoiled with agriculture still playing an important role in the island's economy – one third of the world's supply of nutmeg is produced here, along with cinnamon, cloves, ginger, turmeric and mace, hence it's nickname as the Spice Island. The island offers wonderful black and white sand beaches, and a mountainous interior of dense tropical rainforest, with a network of hiking trails.

Cuba

Over the past five or six years Cuba has become an increasingly popular charter destination – and it's easy to see why. Most charter activity is on the south coast, with a variety of cruising grounds to suit all tastes and moods. Soak up the Latin style in bustling towns and cities, or head to off-lying islands for a quieter interlude. For a real getaway, the Jardines de la Reina marine park is an uninhabited area protected by one of the world's longest coral reefs. And, what ever you do, don't forget to stop in Havana for a few days on the way home. ■