

# BARBADOS BEST

A quintet of stunning courses, a relaxed atmosphere and great food is making this island a major player in Caribbean golf.

WORDS BY PETER MASTERS

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Barbados where you turn your watches back four hours and your stress levels 15 years,” says the pilot as our jumbo jet touches down on the tarmac at Bridgetown.

It is the Caribbean and the usual promises apply. Setting suns over brilliant, blue seas and palm trees swaying in warm, tropical breezes. An island that can fulfil dreams, of that there's no doubt, but you're not stepping back in time here. Barbados has a focus on the future.

As the scissors, handed to David Thompson, closed in on the golden ribbon on opening day at the Apes Hill Club, the country's Prime Minister was keen to remind us of that. Here was the new jewel in the crown of Barbados golf and another million dollar massage for the island's tourism trade. His grip on the driver may

have been more Harry Hill than Harry Vardon, but here was a PM that welcomed such boosts to the economy.

Apes Hill, along with Sandy Lane and Royal Westmoreland, is making this a destination that golfers need to look at, even if there are a few teething problems with regard to access to the courses. This newest recruit is a layout of sublime quality – strategically inspired, immaculately presented and with views over the island that take the breath away. It ticks all the boxes except perhaps one, in that your only hope of playing there is if you agree to buy a house on the property (and to do that, you may not get much change from a million).

But hope hasn't quite disappeared over the horizon with his backside on fire just yet, as David Feherty once so eloquently put it. Our own Wentworth Club is involved as consultants and, in the words of chief

executive Julian Small, “I've told them that it's a course people need to play.” And with that reality ringing in their ears, there are many who feel that Apes Hill may well be taking visitors within the year.

But real estate, and the selling of it, is big business on this relatively small island and the biggest player is Apes Hill owner Sir Charles Williams, who at the age of 77, regularly plays polo and possesses more passion and drive than a Formula 1 driver. He also has more land than anyone else, but exactly how much is a mute point. “There are two questions you can't ask me,” he says grinning, “how many horses I have and how much land.” Too many horses and not enough land is the closest you'll get to an answer.

Sir Charles has a boat that is aptly named ‘Never enough’ and as he potters down the wealthy west coast, he's a mine of information

## LOCATIONS



## WHERE TO PLAY

### APES HILL

**DESIGNERS:** Jeff Potts and Chris Cole

**GREEN FEE:** Residents only

**PAR/YARDAGE:** 72, 7,150

It cost well over £20m to construct and was a painstaking four years in the making, but when Apes Hill opened in December it brought gasps of incredulity from the assembled throng. Jeff Potts, who learnt his trade under Peter and Perry Dye, had come of age. "Every new course tries to fill one or two of three criteria. It wants to be a great challenge, fun to play and have panoramic scenery. This course doesn't just tick one or two boxes, it ticks all three. There's nothing better in the Caribbean," said one American commentator.

Holes 11 to 14 provide an 'Amen corner' every bit as dramatic and invigorating as the one we all know in Georgia. Those holes tiptoe over the brow of the island, disappear amongst jungle and rough coral outcrops, to provide one of the most sensational strings of holes that can be found anywhere. It's that good. The rest of Apes Hill is also hugely impressive. Plenty of space off the tee makes it fun to play and the par 3s are all superb, with strikes over water and across ravines to intricately designed greens. It is also one of the first major projects to be built with one type of grass from tees to green. Paspalum Supreme is a new strain that requires less irrigation, is tolerant to salt water and appears greener.

### ROYAL WESTMORELAND

**DESIGNER:** Robert Trent Jones Jnr

**GREEN FEE (18 HOLES):** £152

**PAR/YARDS:** 72, 7,045

A more natural front nine explores the hillside looking over the west coast with plenty of elevation changes keeping things interesting on the loop back to the clubhouse. The back nine weaves more through the nearby villas, but at no point do the properties get too close to the action.

### SANDY LANE GREEN MONKEY

**DESIGNER:** Tom Fazio

**GREEN FEE (18 HOLES):** £235 (hotel guests only)

**PAR/YARDS:** 72, 7,389

Notoriously hard to get a game here, unless of course you are staying at the Sandy Lane Hotel, but even then the green fee is excessive. Many rank Fazio as the best designer around in the States, but, while Green Monkey has its spectacular moments, there are those that feel it might be a tad over-rated.

### COUNTRY CLUB COURSE

**DESIGNER:** Tom Fazio

**GREEN FEE (18 HOLES):** £143

**PAR/YARDS:** 72, 7,060

Despite holding the World Cup in 2006, this is certainly the poorer relation of the two layouts at Sandy Lane. Quite an old-fashioned design with so many straight holes that they blend into one memory. The layout includes five lakes and the views over the Caribbean are once again delightful.

### BARBADOS GOLF CLUB

**DESIGNER:** Ron Kirby

**GREEN FEE (18 HOLES):** £73

**PAR/YARDS:** 72, 6,805

It might not have quite the stature of its neighbours, but the most accessible course on the island is also one that is rewarding to play. Much flatter than the other links, there is still plenty to challenge the mid handicapper with some tight driving holes and water hazards to avoid.

**Calypso class**  
Apes Hill winds through natural forest with views of the Caribbean from many holes.



## 'MANY FEEL THAT APES HILL MAY WELL BE TAKING VISITORS WITHIN THE YEAR'

about every brick and every tile of seemingly every house you can see. Though the beaches are all open to the public, the plots behind them are worth millions. The west coast is a who's who of movers and shakers, from Simon Cowell and Cliff Richard to the big hitters of big business.

But that isn't all that Barbados is about. It's an island of great diversity. The well-off west, the relaxed south, bursting with Bajan charm, and the rugged east, with its Atlantic surf. There's a very British

backbone with roundabouts, prime ministers and 11 parishes each with its own church. You even drive on the left so there's no excuse not to feel at home. Drink driving laws are virtually non-existent here with the irresponsible advice being, don't spill your drink, but you didn't hear that from us.

The people in Barbados are extraordinarily friendly, whether you're exploring the capital of Bridgetown or enjoying the relaxed nightlife on 2nd Street in Holetown. This little alley is home to an array of bars, The Mews, Elbow Room, Lexy Piano Bar and the serendipitous discovery of an Indian restaurant in Sitar, whose owner plays off a very handy one handicap.

And when you're on the sand, do look out for John Mark Riley, a beach vendor, who sells intricate figurines, made largely from wire, depicting scenes of Barbadian life. "A man from Harrods approached me and put

in an order for 1,000," he tells us, "of course, I had to turn him down because even the small ones take me seven hours to make."

His larger models with palm trees and monkeys take 24 hours to construct and he'll package them up in front of you with a blend of cardboard, sticky tape and ingenuity.

"The tourist trade is great for us, but advertising on television isn't what we need, it's looking after the people who come here and making sure they have the best time possible, that's the best advertising," he says.

John Mark Riley has an entrepreneurial spirit that would make his Prime Minister proud, as well as many hundreds of holidaymakers. ■

### WHERE TO EAT

The choices are endless, but here are my recommendations: Just Grilling, close to Holetown, is a laid-back eatery that serves rice, grilled vegetables and burgers that range from swordfish to beef. Moving up the scale there are a number of high quality, wonderfully located restaurants to tempt you. Champers provides a five-star dining experience with atmosphere to match. The Tides is also exceptional and The Fish Pot has perhaps the fastest growing reputation with good value, rustic Bajan fare and a terrific wine list.

## FIVE THINGS TO DO IN BARBADOS When you're

**1** Try a catamaran cruise. They'll pick you up from anywhere on the island and take you out to swim with the turtles. Food and drink is free and it all costs about £40 a head.

**2** Watch cricket at The Kensington Oval. It's a state of the art flood-lit ground that has an atmosphere all of its own and of course lots of history and tradition.

**3** Visit St Nicholas Abbey. This is an old sugar plantation where rum is still made. Take home a bottle with your name etched on the glass and wonder at the views over Cherry Tree Hill.

## not out on the golf course...

**4** Watch a polo match. Polo is popular and played by the farming community rather than the gentry. There are some brilliant players on the island.

**5** Swim in the sea. The Atlantic east coast is dangerous for swimming, but on the west and south coastlines, once you get in you won't want to get out. Take a snorkel.