“WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT THE CARIBBEAN?” That’s the simple question we asked you, the most avid island travelers, on islands.com. Your wave of enthusiastic answers was overwhelming. From snorkeling off San Salvador in the Bahamas to escaping the winter at Pigeon Point Beach on Tobago, you love the Caribbean from end to end. Here, we celebrate that love with your best insights — and share some of our own.

YOUR REASONS WHY THE CARIBBEAN IS

Perfect
Perfect Beaches

Readers love the BVI’s Baths (top), the USVI’s Trunk Bay (left) and Anguilla’s Shoal Bay East (opposite) for the sands and much more.

*Beauty is in the eye of the beach-goer. While every beach is essentially the same — sand next to water — every traveler seems loyal to a different one. Granted, many readers (and islands editors) do love the famously soft Trunk Bay on St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands. But to truly enjoy it, you have to get there early in the day and fast, like reader Dorene Johnson of Nevada did: “We negotiated our own taxi to the ferry dock on St. Thomas to catch the boat to St. John,” she says. “We arrived way ahead of the cruise-ship excursions and had Trunk Bay almost to ourselves. We snorkeled the underwater trail, swam in the stunningly turquoise clear warm water and sunned on the only sand I have ever lied in that I could just dust off.”

Beyond just the sand, Anguilla’s Shoal Bay East earns raves for, as Deborah Ponder Mance of Maryland puts it, “Junior’s glass-bottom boat, hot ribs and cold Caribs at Uncle Ernie’s, rum punches at Gwen’s Reggae Bar, naps under the palms and infinite indigo night skies.” And the Baths in the British Virgin Islands — when you’re not lounging at White Bay, Devil’s Bay or Little Thatch — have gorgeous sands slipping through the renowned granite boulders. “The Baths are the Caribbean at its best,” says reader Linda-Jo Block of Maryland.

Yet the real beauty is that, even in a place as popular as the Caribbean is, spectacular no-name beaches are still ripe for discovery on so many islands here. While Grand Cayman’s Seven Mile Beach and the Turks and Caicos’ Grace Bay earn much love from readers, the never-stepped-on feel of almost any Exumas beach like the one on the east side of Shroud Cay is an intimate find. “Having cruised the Bahamas from end to end over the past 35 years, I find that this beach stands out above the rest,” says reader John Kaufman of Colorado. “It can only be accessed by boat. At the top of a hill next to the beach are bottles with messages that have floated to the sand.”

That quiet intimacy can be found a bit under the radar on popular islands. Grand Cayman’s Rum Point “is a gem of a beach if you don’t want large crowds and rough waters,” says reader Stephanie Powers. The Dominican Republic’s Samana Peninsula “is an unspoiled getaway with beautiful white-sand beaches,” says Sandra Bertoli of Maryland.

But no matter what beach we go to and enjoy, our personal memories there can make it a favorite. Stephen Lackley of Maryland loved playing American football and finding a stranded baby shark at Accra Beach in Barbados. On St. John, Kim Robinson of Massachusetts encountered a friendly roadside vendor named Vie who showed off a private beach on the eastern shore. The name of this hideaway? Vie’s Beach, naturally. And Larry Kantner is partial to Tobago’s Pigeon Point, but as he hunkers down for his cold Missouri winter, “any beach in the warm, sunny Caribbean is heaven.”
"My wife and I were pampered from the moment we arrived."

> READER JOSEPH SHAFER

Perfect Resorts

> EVERYONE IS CERTAIN THEY’VE FOUND THAT
perfect place to stay in the Caribbean.

More than any other category — just edging out “snorkeling” — resorts garnered the most reader picks. It’s no surprise; the heart of any trip is your home base, whether that’s your own suite, villa or entire island.

So what is the perfect place to stay? For a can’t-miss resort, beat the path with many fellow island travelers to Jamaica. There’s a lot of love for the ease of all-inclusives. “I love Sandals Negril — the beach, the food, the people,” says Dale Loundsback of Virginia, who was married there. Other readers rave about the Royal Plantation in Ocho Rios for its mango mimosas on the beach, total comfort beds and a pillow menu — five choices for sweet dreams. Outside Jamaica, Grenada’s LaSource, St. Lucia’s Almond Morgan Bay and Aruba’s Tamarijn earn affection.

Again, the Caribbean escape proves to be what you make it. Those seeking the ultimate luxury trip find it alongside celebrities at the relaxing private-island Parrot Cay in the Turks and Caicos, on the tucked-away beaches of Caneel Bay on St. John and atop the bluff of gorgeous Cap Maison on St. Lucia. Joseph Shafer of Kentucky experienced such a trip at the Four Seasons Resort, Nevis, scheduled to reopen next year after its remodeling work. “The serenity and calmness of the resort captured our imagination,” he says. “We stepped off our shuttle boat and were warmly greeted and ushered to our quiet villa. My wife and I were pampered from the moment we arrived.”

For a stay that’s not so well known, go boutique. Resorts with just handfuls of rooms and villas are sprinkled in the quiet pockets of the Caribbean, like the 25 cottage suites of Hermitage Bay on Antigua or the 11 bungalows of Natura Cabana in the Dominican Republic. “We stayed for a week at Mango Bay Resort on Virgin Gorda,” says Karen Winslow of South Carolina. “The place was so beautiful and the snorkeling was great, just 20 steps from our beachside villa. It was so worth the money.”

Wherever you book, whether at a mega-resort or private estate home, exceptional service makes all the difference for your stay. “We stayed at the renovated Holland House Beach Hotel right on St. Maarten’s new boardwalk and had the time of our lives,” says Shan-Non Straw of Maryland. “But what we loved most was ‘ICeman,’ the best beach attendant. He set up our umbrella and chairs, and brought us drinks, towels, whatever we needed. We tipped him well.”

With the Caribbean and Atlantic often outside your door, you can always escape to a resort — then escape even farther. “We love Pelican Bay at Lucaya hotel and Bimini Bay Resort & Marina in the Bahamas,” says Sherri Gorkey of North Carolina, “but we generally spend our time out on a boat in the middle of the ocean.”
IN THE CARIBBEAN ISLANDS, THERE ARE AT LEAST 20 ways you’ll hear, “Welcome to my island” — “Bienvenu sur mon île,” “Bon bini na mi isla” and “Welkom op mijn eiland” being only a few of them. The people here are truly the most diverse of any island region in the world.

The destination of St. Martin and St. Maarten is one of the best embodiments of worlds coming together, with the French on the north side and the Dutch on the south. Best of all, both sides are eager to sit down with you at the table. Often that’s the best Caribbean culture — the one that’s welcoming you at the moment. “I am madly in love with Anguilla,” says reader Scot Nakagawa of Oregon. “I love the small-scale, rural feel of the place. I felt embraced by its rich sense of community. It brought me back to that rural life I enjoyed in the 1960s. The kindness and warmth of the people and the great pride they take in their culture and way of life remind me of the importance of focusing on the core things in life.”

Marilyn Santangelo of Washington shares that same feeling, but on Bonaire. “Having lived in the Netherlands, we feel at home with Dutch names and neighborhoods,” she says. “For many, the attraction is diving; but look deeper than the deep and you’ll see a special island with a familiar feel, whether you’re from Seattle, Eindhoven or Kralendijk.” Bonaire’s ABC neighbor, Curaçao, also has the Dutch flavor, as well as influences from the United States, South America, Portugal and more throughout the island. There’s even “the Western Hemisphere’s oldest synagogue in continuous use and a fabulous museum of African history,” says Andrew B. Simmons of Illinois. “With a warm, welcoming and diverse population, Curaçao is the perfect spot.”

Engaging with the locals shows the true colors of the island. When Ross Weintraub of Pennsylvania forgot his camera on his honeymoon to St. Lucia, he and his wife were “devastated.” “The concierge had a driver stop at her home on the way from the airport to get her camera for us to borrow,” he says. “We have found the friendliest people are on St. Lucia.”

Or are they in a fishing village on the southern tip of Barbados, where Shelagh Considine of Washington says, “people are ‘wonderful, hardworking and friendly’”?

Or, as other travelers assured, are they on Eleuthera, or Little Cayman, or Grenada, or Aruba or...?” “It’s the islanders who seal your love for the Caribbean,” says Sharyl Mueller of Georgia, who especially adores the people of St. Croix. “This is where living begins. Instantly and quite willingly, you’ll commit yourself to revere these people, admire their lifestyle and adore their islands.”
1) CATCH CONCH. 2) FRY CONCH. A CARIBBEAN RECIPE CAN BE just that easy. The hard part is when you see a live conch squirming and stretching like an alien snail at Da Conch Shack in the Turks and Caicos. If you picture those critters, you can’t eat your fritters. And yet, somehow, we do. Conch fritters, conch salad, conch chowder. conch this, conch that popped up often in readers’ picks for favorite Caribbean food, as iconic as jerk chicken from Jamaica’s Boston Bay. What to order after your conch? “I had finished off my conch fritters and conch salad at the Big Ten restaurant in Nassau’s Fish Fry village and I didn’t see ‘dessert’ on the menu,” says reader Jonathan Harris. “The owner goes in back and brings out a plastic-foam bowl covered in foil. Inside was guava duff, like a sweet dough mixed with guava. Great!” A year later, at a fancy Bahamian restaurant, I asked if they served guava duff. The waitress smiled big. “Baby, how ya know about guava duff?”

Flavors can also explode in complexity in gourmet restaurants, like the ones on St. Martin/Maarten. There, a recipe can be as involved as searing foie gras, melting peanut butter and concocting a port-and-fig jelly and nestling it in a puff pastry, which is what chef Dino Jagtiani does for his popular “PB&J” appetizer at Temptation restaurant.

Also on the must-taste list: curried goat on Bonaire, breadfruit pie on Grenada, the black pineapple on Antigua and, as reader Heather Alexander recommends, jerk chicken wings on Jamaica “that will light you up.”

Above all, though, we love fresh Caribbean lobster. St. Maarten is naturally part of that celebration. It’s fun on a stick at the Boo-Boo-Jam restaurant on Orient Bay, which Sharon Long of Wisconsin says is her “favorite place to eat.” It’s festive for Friday night “lobster mania” at St. Maarten’s Greenhouse restaurant, where reader Susan Conover of California goes. “We have since brought many of our friends to St. Maarten to meet our friends at the Greenhouse, and they too left with many happy memories,” she says.

Like the Caribbean itself, lobster is dressed up or stripped down. Have it grilled by a chef on private Royal Plantation Island in the Exumas or grilled near your picnic table at St. Kitts’ Sprat Net, “an outdoor, informal place that serves the best lobster,” says Cheryl Verde of Missouri.

But it may be best enjoyed during a barbecue on the beach, as reader Janie James-High of Arizona recently enjoyed on a secluded cove in the Grenadines’ Tobago Cays. “It’s the fragrance and taste of the sea,” she says. “As always, the Caribbean is a feast for all the senses, filling me up to only want it more.”
Bucket lists were made for the Caribbean. On Jamaica alone, you can check off at least two “must do before I die” activities. First is climbing Dunn’s River Falls, so synonymous with the island it’s on the back of Jamaica’s $100 bill. Let the water massage you as it pours over the human chain of hikers. “My husband and I did it on a whim, and it was a great experience,” says reader Cheryl Larimer of Minnesota. There are also caffeinated coffee trips like the Blue Mountain Bicycle Tour. “I loved the trip up the mountains on the coffee tour,” says Heidi Kukta of Utah, “but biking down the mountain was breathtaking.”

Just as awe-inspiring for Christi McLellan of California was “gleefully playing with the rays” of Stingray City on Grand Cayman. On Puerto Rico’s Vieques island, Keri Meador of Kentucky loved kayaking at night through the mangrove maze that opens onto famous Bio Bay. “This excursion is an experience that few locations in the world offer,” she says. “How’s that for nightlife?” And a sailing cruise through the British and U.S. Virgin Islands can be “one of the best family vacations ever,” says Cindy Vedsted of Wyoming. Even a simple sunset sail, like on the historic schooner Roseway off St. Croix, can be epic, “with clouds that were blindingly white all day taking on a coral peachy shade, then fading to unbelievable lavenders,” says Gale Riley of Massachusetts.

Yet there’s a wealth of Caribbean activities just bubbling under those iconic ones. While Cozumel is known for snorkeling, Louise Werret of North Dakota loved exploring the Maya ruins. Rum dominates the scene on Barbados, but Harrison’s Cave goes below the surface to offer “a beautiful tram ride through rooms and rooms of caves,” says Phyllis Haner of New York. The restaurants and shops are reasons alone to go to St. Martin/Maarten, though Tracy DeVries of Michigan finds her slice of perfection just a few minutes offshore. “Your first glimpse is an idyllic sliver of white sand that meets the warm, shallow, crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean,” she says. “Lined with colorful lounges and umbrellas, the beach invites relaxation. If activity is what you seek, try kayaking or exploring the uninhabited island by foot. My 11-year-old daughter insists that the Karibuni beach bar is where the best cheeseburger in paradise is. Welcome to Pinel Island.”

“So do what you must do, be it blokarting on Bonaire, zip-lining through a rainforest on St. Kitts or browsing the shops on St. Thomas. Or do the best Caribbean activity of all, says reader Chris Mercier: “Chillin’.”
Point your camera almost anywhere in the Caribbean and — click — you have an amazing photo for your travel album. One islands.com editor just returned from a week in the Dominican Republic and filled up his memory cards shooting 2,000 images of towering Pico Duarte, plus waterfalls, horses and beaches. (And yes, that’s after deleting hundreds on the fly.)

The colorful richness of Caribbean scenery can be overwhelming, whether in the swirling blue paints of the Exumas’ waters or the wild green slopes of Dominica’s jungle. Even the beaches range from Eleuthera pink to the Turks and Caicos white to Montserrat black. Sometimes the colors melt together as sky matches sea; sometimes they change all together in the twilight of an orange sunset.

But if you come back with just one scenic picture, make it of St. Lucia’s Pitons. As iconic and well photographed as those twin 2,000-plus-foot peaks already are, readers could still gaze out at them for days. “Memories of walking hand in hand with the water splashing against our feet all took place in the shadow of the famous Pitons,” says James Schutt of Wisconsin. They were the highlight for Josephine Wade of New York too. “I imagine my love and I in St. Lucia strolling along the lush greenery with the twin peaks in the distance heading to the beautiful golden beaches,” she says. “Afterward we lay in our four-poster in the open-air bedroom with nothing blocking our view of the brilliant blue sky and the island’s Pitons so breathtaking that all we could do was sigh.”

Other only-in-the-Caribbean sights that take our collective breath away include the Exumas’ Glass Window Bridge separating ocean and sea, the granite boulders and caves of Virgin Gorda’s Baths, and the million-year-old limestone shards that seem to knife up from below in Grand Cayman’s Hell.

The top reader response for scenery: “any Caribbean water.” “That indescribable crystal color shocks me every time I see it, sending peace and calm to my very core,” says Judy Breadner of Ontario. “Whatever else I have ever seen in the Caribbean, it is the water that will always bring me back. It touches my very soul.”
RELAXING MUSIC RELAXES YOUR HEART. THAT’S A scientific fact recently discovered in Europe but evi-
denced like nowhere else than in the Caribbean. Musicians’ rhythms here seem to match the baseline of waves splash-
ing on shore, calming any traveler within earshot of both.

That harmony may sound the sweetest on Jamaica, with the easy beats of reggae soaking into the island. “Negro buzzes as reggae pumps,” says John Comfort of South Carolina. “Mellow mood, enticing mystery, and colorful unity of ocean and land lead to a mystical enchantment.” Reader Andrew Wilkins went so far as to compose an ode. “Cool sand between my toes and stars so close you can touch. Locals light the bonfire as my eyes grow heavy with the rhythms of irie.”

Reggae relaxation has spread across the islands as the Caribbean soundtrack, whether during a set with Bankie Banx on Anguilla or on the radio on St. Croix. Yet travelers know that other islands have signature vibes too, especially when there’s a need to pick up the beat. On Martinique, you can’t have a party without the party music of zouk. In the Dominican Republic, you can’t dance without merengue. On Trinidad, soca enlivens the Carnival like nothing else. It too has spread, with one reader pointing us to a video of St. Lucian soca artist Herb Black doing a bouncy sing-a-
long of the song “Suzette.” “Somebody in the crowd say her name loud! SUUUUUZZEEEEETTE!”

Musicians like that have loyal fol-
lowings of travelers who have checked off the Bob Marley discography. From his native Belize, Andy Palacio put punta rock on the Carib-
bean map as the music spread to places including Roatán and the Bay islands. He helped champion Garifuna culture—descended from Africa, Arawak and Carib people—all the way to his death in 2008. Garifuna bands continue his legacy as they weave African drumbeats with more expected island rhythms. Fans of steel pan flock to hear “Pan Man” Lee Connor play the iconic steel drums on Aruba.

Sometimes, though, you don’t even have to seek out the best Caribbean music. Instead, it will come to you, whether on a parade on Puerto Rico or in the Junkanoo festival of the Bahamas. Strolling down the streets of San Pedro on Ambergris Caye, Belize, reader Lydia Langston could hear the sounds weaving through everything. “I’m beginning to understand the magic that is part of San Pedro,” she says. “It’s a kaleidoscope of colors, sounds and smells, from the colorful costumes during fiesta to the music that you hear from live bands and jukeboxes to the musical laughter of the children and adults alike.”
Quiet green on waves of blue. That is the promise of the Caribbean as you fly in by air — untouched island paradises. While man has crept in and sometimes even crowded the fringes, the interiors of many islands are still a wild celebration of nature.

One such party is at the Barbados Wildlife Reserve, where green monkeys happily hang out in the forest. “Snow White doesn’t know what she’s missing,” says reader Kathryn Maria Noll of Pennsylvania. “This magical, mahogany canopied sanctuary with its cobblestone paths, lily ponds and friendly, wandering creatures is something right out of a rustic fairy tale. You must see the afternoon feeding to believe it. Caves, monkeys, deer, turtles and birds all gather in a circle to share a peaceful community meal. Baby monkeys gorging snacks on a bench with you is definitely delightful. But watching a turtle stroll by with a monkey sitting on its shell while savoring an orange will charm the flip-flops off you.”

Nature also explodes seemingly everywhere in the parks of Martinique, which make up about two-thirds of the island, including around Mount Pelée volcano. “The absolutely invigorating aromas and experience of wandering the dappled sunlight paths of the lush, sultry rainforest surrounding the volcano is something I will never forget,” says George Graf of Virginia.

Even on more traveled islands, a taste of nature is part of the itinerary. “On Cozumel, we discovered Chankanaab Park,” says Mary Dean of Michigan. “Beautiful in its own right, it sits upon the warm ocean waters, not far from the spectacular Palancar Reef. On land, the park teems with tropical foliage and boasts quiet pathways and a pristine beach.”

In fact, readers’ picks for their favorite eco retreats made for a long list, an encouraging sign for the Caribbean’s sustainability. On the list, a night hike and traditional Taino ceremony are highlights of Puerto Rico’s must-see El Yunque National Forest. The 200-foot-wide Boiling Lake in Morne Trois Piton National Park on Dominica is the earth at its geothermal best. And many travelers cited the Virgin Islands National Park on St. John as the place they love for an eco retreat, both in the protected 7,000-plus acres on land and the 7,650 on the sea. “From the park that protects the fragile underwater ecosystem to the many hiking trails throughout the island, St. John has its own unique story to tell,” says Laura Markowitch of Ohio. “Anyone can feel like this is their own private oasis.”
That water begs you to dive in, heed that call.

A Caribbean escape is complete only after you’ve had fins swishing on your feet, water enveloping your body, and a mask covering — and truly opening — your eyes.

Readers expressed their love of snorkeling more than almost anything else in the Caribbean, especially in the waters weaving through the U.S. Virgin Islands. “You can step into the crystal-clear, aquamarine waters off St. John and become a fish of sorts yourself,” says Don Welch of Florida. “You magically transport into a fantasy tank of your own as you delight at sea turtles and brightly colored fish that glide by. It’s a truly hypnotizing and relaxing effect that you’ll want to seek out again and again and again.”

For more specific U.S. Virgin Islands spots, readers dove in with their favorites. Dane Lesser claims Waterlemon Cay is the best of all. Judy Shook will never forget the two huge eagle rays that circled her at Haulover Bay. And Buck Island “can’t be beat,” says Christina St. Pierre, though Kurt Barbucio says the same of Coki Beach.

Or go almost anywhere. Even sailing from Miami toward the well-traveled waters of Nassau, Mary Harbocian found terrific snorkeling. “We crept into small coves and watched dolphins jump and play in our wake. It was all slow and sensuous. But I think my favorite time was when the captain threw over the anchor in about 30 feet of water with no land in sight. I put on goggles and slipped into this warm, clear bath. It was white sand and hundreds of starfish as far as I could see, like an upside-down night sky.”

Bonaire’s sites are known for the yellow stones that mark spots on the leeward side. “We scheduled dives for the morning, then found ourselves snorkeling all afternoon in many of the spots, most of which are accessible by land,” says Robert Otrupchak of New Jersey. “We’ve since tried other heralded sites and still attest that Bonaire offers the best in the Caribbean.”

Granted, the opinions may differ from fans of Aruba’s Boca Catalina, the Bahamas’ San Salvador, Grand Cayman’s Rum Point, the Turks and Caicos’ Princess Alexandra Land and Sea National Park, and the Grenadines’ Mustique Island (“Better than the Great Barrier Reef,” says Betsy Cairns of New Mexico).

Wherever the perfect snorkeling is in the Caribbean, let’s allow Debbra Dunning Brouillette of Texas to have the last word on it — for now. “I love that every Caribbean island has its own personality and unique qualities, even underwater,” she says. “Whether diving a shallow reef, exploring a wreck, or spotting an eagle ray, there is really never a dull day on a Caribbean reef.”
Perfect Spas

This sea can seem like one giant hot tub. You take a dip, your worries melt away. So what happens when you visit a spa in the Caribbean? As over-stressed as you may be back on the mainland, here you're in danger of becoming overrelaxed. You yourself could melt away. It's a risk readers are willing to take.

The only stress — and it's minor — is picking the spa. Oh, and picking from the spa’s menu. For Islands editors who have “worked” to find the best Caribbean spas, it’s impossible to go wrong with the signature body treatment of jasmine and vanilla oil dancing on you like raindrops at the Ritz-Carlton’s Silver Rain spa on Grand Cayman. Share the experience in the Two by Sea package that can last as long as you’d like. The Wyndham Cozumel Resort & Spa wraps you in luxury and three kinds of Caribbean seaweed. The Presidente InterContinental’s Mandara Spa on Cozumel has the do-it-at-least-once-in-your-life Mayan steam bath in a domed bungalow called a temazcal. Our other favorites include the overwater treatment rooms at the Raffles Amrita Spa on Canouan in the Grenadines; the flowery open-air showers at the Lapli Spa at Discover at Marigot Bay on St. Lucia and the spicy aromas of the Oasis Spa at Lasource on Grenada. And when you’re desperate for a spa and need the shortest plane ride possible, readers recommend the Natural Mystic Spa at the Marley Resort in Nassau. Slip into the Caribbean detoxifying Bath or Mocha Rum Wrap right away.

When leaving your room to go to the spa is too much effort, readers point to spas that come to them. “I love the Nomadic Spa on my beloved St. John,” says Leiana Goede of Michigan. “The luxurious spa services are sent right to your rented villa or home. The botanical butter scrub is my favorite — sea salt blended with butters of shea, cocoa and mango to leave your skin buttery-soft, smooth and silky.” Best of all, many spas are working on becoming more authentic, more immersive, more relaxing. In the past year, the British Virgin Islands’ Peter Island Resort officially added “& Spa” to its name — and an Ayurvedic “Science of Life” wellness program. The Venus Spa at the CuisinArt Resort on Anguilla tripled in size. And there’s more, more, more. Let your perfect Caribbean experience begin.

WIN A CARIBBEAN TRIP. If you have a favorite Caribbean spot you didn’t see listed here, let us know — and enter to win a stay at Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic. For more, visit islands.com/caribbean