

‘Step out of bed into a warm, turquoise sea’

I get wary when a beach in the Caribbean is described as having “pink” sand, yet here I am holding a handful of grains and shell fragments that are without doubt roseate.

“We never had pink sand before,” explains Barbara Petit, the French co-owner of Barbuda Belle, a bare-foot luxury beach escape on the north coast of Barbuda, Antigua’s flat and arid sister isle. “It was a surprise gift from Irma.”

In September 2017 the eye of this category five hurricane passed right over the island, causing so much devastation that Barbuda’s 1,800 residents had to be evacuated for a year. It took the Petit family and their staff eight months to get the resort’s chic wooden bungalows back in shape, but now Barbuda Belle is one of the most soul-soothing escapes I’ve come across in more than two decades of Caribbean travel. Set beside a remote and deserted beach but with every comfort laid on, Barbuda Belle is the sort of castaway paradise to which Hollywood scriptwriters get banished with a stern instruction “finish that movie – or else!”.

Such uplifting tales of recovery are nothing new in a region where hurricanes are an annual threat – as the northern islands of the Bahamas discovered to their cost at the start of this month. Dorian, like Irma and Maria before it, was exceptionally harsh, yet these 185mph winds invariably provoke a powerful desire among islanders to unite and come back “stronger”, as the flurry of social media hashtags put it. “We are a resilient people who refuse to surrender even in the most difficult of times,” a statement from the

Caribbean Tourism Organisation declared, and the regeneration that followed the 2017 storms is without doubt good news for travellers contemplating a Caribbean trip this winter.

One standout destination is the tiny British Overseas Territory of Anguilla, where the number of UK visitors has doubled thanks to its combination of uncrowded white sands and glamorously reborn beach resorts such as Belmond Cap Juluca and Malliouhana. A short hop east, the minuscule French island of St Barts is likewise in sparkling form, now cleaned up with the flagship Eden Rock St Barths hotel set to reopen on Nov 20 after an extensive two-year renovation. In the British Virgin Islands sailing holidays and villa rentals are back in full swing and Guana Island, Valley Trunk and Oil Nut Bay are open for business.

It is worth remembering that less than a third of the Caribbean was struck by Irma and Maria, just as much of the Bahamas was unaffected by Dorian, and many islands are in buoyant mood with visitor numbers on the rise. Barbados, the UK’s favourite

destination, remains a trustworthy choice for first-time visitors and families. Jamaica is almost as popular, and a smart pick if you have teenagers in tow, thanks to its music, charismatic islanders and high-adrenalin adventures from mud buggy rides to swimming with horses. This might also be a good year to visit St Lucia as the options for travelling to this super-scenic island will be reduced from June 2020, when Virgin Atlantic stops flying there after 21 years, leaving British Airways as the principal source of direct flights.

For a holiday beyond fly-and-flop but

still with an easy pace, take to the water. Dream Yacht Charters offers supremely relaxed island-hopping voyages aboard a shared catamaran, while Ramblers Holidays’ “Cruise and Walk” trips combine the leisurely progress of a cruise with stimulating guided walks in contrasting ports of call. And if you can find the time and money to push on from a gateway island to somewhere smaller you’ll be rewarded with a calmer and less commercialised holiday. Seductive examples are flying into St Kitts then taking the short speedboat ride over to Nevis, connecting in Barbados for Bequia in St Vincent and the Grenadines, and hopping on the 40-minute flight from Antigua south to Dominica.

Eighteen months ago I found it heartbreaking to see Dominica’s tremendous rainforests stripped bare as the bristles on a brush by Maria. Boats, vehicles and shipping containers were tossed around its hillsides. Now this majestic island is alive with fresh places to stay, including the new Jungle Bay eco resort and Kempinski’s 151-room Cabrits Resort set to open on Oct 14. Once again, the trees are lush with green leaves, the trails to thundering waterfalls have been cleared and the sky is – fittingly – full of rainbows.



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INTO THE BLUE
Island-hopping in the Grenadines by catamaran





**SOAK UP
THE SUN**

Step from your bed into a beach hammock; the new Belmond Cap Juluca in Anguilla, below

