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Something New Under the Caribbean Sun



Alexis Andrews/Sugar Ridge

The Sugar Ridge resort will be opening on Antigua the beginning of December.

IF you build it, they will come.

At least that's what developers in the [Caribbean](#) seem to think, especially in trendy areas like [St. Lucia](#), [Anguilla](#), the [Dominican Republic](#) and [Turks and Caicos](#), where grand ambitions and a large dose of positive thinking have buoyed high-end resort development for yet another year.

Despite a persistent economic downturn with no clear end in sight,

luxury hotels are cropping up on islands big and small. The suites are lavish, the spas are pampering, and as for infinity pools, there seems to be no end to them.

With guarded optimism in the air, airlines are adding flights to destinations across the Caribbean, and entrepreneurs and tourism boards are rolling out new activities like kite-boarding festivals and historical zip-lining tours.

But will this new outlook stand up to the continuing effects of the downturn, which caused a loss of about a quarter-million American tourists for the region last year?

Hugh Riley, secretary general of the Caribbean Tourism Organization, is hopeful. “The phones are starting to ring,” he said. “Everybody’s looking for a deal.”

As such, even some high-end resorts are hedging their bets and providing those deals. “What we’re seeing is a lot of added value over deep discounts, like kids staying for free, and extra nights for free,” Mr. Riley said. Ritz-Carlton Hotels, for example, is offering a daily \$100 credit at all Caribbean resorts from Jan. 4 to April 30 (www.ritzcarlton.com/en/promotions/reconnect), and Rosewood Hotels and Resorts (www.rosewoodhotels.com) is offering a free fifth night in [St. John](#), [Virgin Gorda](#) and [Antigua](#) from Jan. 3 to May 30. Diane McDavitt, president of Luxurylink.com, which offers discounts on high-end hotels and villas, agrees that the Caribbean is more affordable than usual and that travelers have noticed. She has seen a 54 percent increase in Caribbean packages sold this year over last.

According to Mr. Riley, it’s still a little early to determine whether the new properties, activities and flights listed below will fill to capacity. “Everyone is waiting until the last minute to book, wreaking havoc with our ability to forecast,” he said.

But those who do go will have a wide range of new choices and may also enjoy generous bargains — not to mention some much-needed down time.

All hotel rates are per person and based on double occupancy, unless otherwise noted.

Anguilla

The big news on this small, exclusive island is that the celebrity designer [Kelly Wearstler](#) has made her Caribbean debut, creating the interiors for the new Viceroy Anguilla Resort and Residences (866-270-7798; www.viceroyanguilla.com). Opening early next month, the property is on 35 acres, including 3,200 feet of beachfront. It includes 166 villas decorated by Ms. Wearstler, who used driftwood lamps, petrified-wood tables and crafts from India, Asia and Africa, to soften the sharp, geometric lines of the architecture. A 140-seat restaurant overlooks Barnes Bay and Meads Bay, while the Half Shell bar is built into a cliff. There is also an 8,000-square-foot spa, a separate fitness center and an infinity pool. Nightly rates start at \$695 for the villa. Book by Jan. 31 and receive a third night free.

Antigua

Sugar Ridge (866-591-4881; www.sugarridgeantigua.com), a 60-room boutique resort tucked into the coastal hillside, will open on Dec. 1. It will have two restaurants, three swimming pools, a fitness center and the island's first Aveda spa. Reserve a minimum of five nights by Jan. 31 at high-season nightly rates of \$120 with breakfast or \$210 all inclusive.

Reopening on Dec. 1 will be the ultraluxe [Jumby Bay](http://www.jumbybayresort.com), a Rosewood Resort (888-767-3966; www.jumbybayresort.com), which was closed last season for a \$28 million renovation. The guest rooms have been completely redesigned in a classic British colonial style, and there are 28 new suites, an open-air spa, an oceanfront infinity pool attached to a bistro and a new restaurant. The resort, on a 300-acre island, is accessible only by boat from Antigua, two miles south. Nightly rates start at \$1,395 and include all meals and beverages, afternoon tea, a water taxi from Antigua, gear for activities and access to a fitness club.

Aruba

The [Renaissance Aruba Resort & Casino](http://www.renaissancearuba.com) (800-421-8188; www.renaissancearuba.com), situated on a 40-acre island, has a remodeled spa that features Aruban aloe in its treatments. It is also the home of only the second Starbucks in the Caribbean. The hotel is offering a 40 percent discount for rooms booked by Nov. 30 for travel Jan. 1 to April 8, with room rates beginning at \$254; the starting discounted rate is \$147 through the remainder of April.

On Aruba proper, a new outreach program, the Embrace Project, is available at the [Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort & Casino](http://www.aruba.hyatt.com) (011-297-586-1234; www.aruba.hyatt.com). The program involves morning-long clean-ups of landmarks like the Balashi Gold Mine Ruins.

In July, the [Archaeological Museum of Aruba](http://www.archaeologicalmuseumofaruba.com) (011-297-582-8979) reopened in its new home, which is part of the recently restored Ecury family compound in the capital, Oranjestad. It covers 5,000 years of local history. There are also a new visitor center and improved walking paths in Arikok National Park (011-297-585-1234).

Next month, AirTran (www.airtran.com) will begin nonstop flights from Atlanta on Saturdays. In February, it will offer Saturday flights between Orlando, Fla., and Aruba.

Bahamas

[Grand Bahama](#) Island is now offering a flexible package of hotels, restaurants and activities called Club Grand Bahama (www.bahamas.com). It allows travelers, depending on their budget, to choose from five resorts, 21 restaurants and various activities for nightly rates starting at \$88. Delta Air Lines has taken note: it is beginning nonstop service between Kennedy Airport in New York and Grand Bahama Island this month.

In January, the Sandals Emerald Bay, Great Exhuma, (888-726-3257; www.sandals.com) will open. The 500-acre resort, formerly owned by Four Seasons, will feature a new one-acre pool, an 18-hole golf course designed by [Greg Norman](#) and a marina. All-inclusive nightly rates, including an open-ended 50 percent discount, start at \$324.

On Dec. 17, AirTran will begin offering direct flights from Atlanta, Baltimore/Washington and Orlando to [Nassau](#).

Barbados

[The Crane Resort & Residences](#) (246-423-6220; www.thecrane.com) in St. Philip has a new shopping and entertainment center called Crane Village. Modeled after an 18th-century Barbadian village, the 55,000-square-foot area includes several restaurants, a bookstore, a beauty salon and a fitness center.

Headliners for the Barbados Jazz Festival (www.barbadosjazzfestival.com), Jan. 11 to 17, include Smokey Robinson, the trumpeter Etienne Charles and the saxophonist [Joe Lovano](#). Tickets are \$25 to \$100.

British Virgin Islands

High above Cane Garden Bay on the island of [Tortola](#) sits Arundel Villa (866-206-1332; [www.arundelvilla.com](#)), a three-bedroom luxury property featuring sophisticated touches like a baby grand piano and an international art collection. Available for rental for the first time, the villa is owned by a Washington lawyer and political adviser who used it to entertain Ted Kennedy and world leaders. Arundel rents for \$7,100 a week Jan. 1 to April 18.

For recreation, the first-ever BVI Kite Jam ([www.bvikitejam.com](#)) is scheduled for March 1 to 5. Kite-boarding races, workshops and trips for all levels will take place on the North Sound, Virgin Gorda, Anegada and [Richard Branson's](#) Necker Island.

Cayman Islands

The area doesn't have any new hot hotels this season, but it's got hot talent. [Alicia Keys](#) will be featured at the Cayman Jazz Festival ([www.caymanislands.ky/jazzfest](#)) on Dec. 3 to 5. Other performers will include Peabo Bryson and Oleta Adams.

Curaçao

The new Hyatt Regency Curaçao Golf Resort, Spa and Marina (800-858-2873; [www.curacao.hyatt.com](#)) has something for everyone, including an 18-hole golf course designed by Pete Dye, a 4,500-square-foot spa, a children's camp and three restaurants. The 350-room beachfront hotel, part of the 1,500-acre Santa Barbara Plantation resort community, is scheduled to open in March. Introductory rates are expected to be in the mid-\$200 range per room.

The Renaissance Curaçao Resort & Casino (011-599-9-435-5000; [www.renaissancecuracao.com](#)), which opened in Willemstad last February, is introducing all-inclusive pricing, starting at \$496 a night for Jan. 4 to April 8. Starting this month, American Airlines ([www.aa.com](#)) will increase flights to Curaçao from once to twice a day from Miami.

Dominican Republic

The bulk of the activity on this popular island has been in [Punta Cana](#), which is exploding with development. On Nov. 1, the exclusive Zoëtry Agua Punta Cana (www.zoetryresorts.com/agua) opened with 53 cane-thatched suites. An all-inclusive nightly rate, starting at \$532 a room for the high season, comes with the assurance of no check-in or check-out time.

Also new in Punta Cana is the Barceló Bávaro Family Deluxe (800-227-2356; www.barcelo.com), part of a family-oriented resort complex, opening next month. Starting nightly rates are \$249 for adults and \$125 for each child, though 50 percent discounts are available for early booking.

British Airways started offering twice-weekly service from Gatwick Airport serving London last month, while JetBlue has introduced daily flights between [Santo Domingo](#) and both Boston and Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Jamaica

Island Outpost (800-688-7678; www.islandoutpost.com), a collection of hotels and villas in Jamaica, has opened several new villas in the last year. They include Cave Canem, a four-bedroom Mediterranean-style villa with an infinity pool, housekeeper and private walkway to the beach in Treasure Beach (\$500 a night), and Itopia, a secluded, fully staffed 17th-century country home with three bedrooms at Runaway Bay (\$595 a night).

JetBlue started daily nonstop service between Kennedy Airport and Kingston last month. Delta will begin Saturday flights between Kennedy and Kingston on Dec. 12. AirTran plans to begin daily service to Montego Bay from Atlanta, Orlando and Baltimore/Washington.

Puerto Rico

The Sheraton Puerto Rico Convention Center Hotel and Casino (866-932-7269; www.sheratonpuertorico.com) opens on Nov. 16 in [San Juan](#). The 503-room hotel, currently trying to earn the Green Building Council's LEED certification, has a 57,000-square-foot sun deck with pools for adults and children. There is also a 7,000-square-foot spa. Nightly rates start at \$159 per room; book by Jan. 31 for a 35 percent discount on rooms and meals and 15 percent off spa services.

Also, the San Juan Water and Beach Club Hotel (888-265-6699; www.waterbeachclubhotel.com), whose rooftop bar is a popular local hangout, is now being managed by the Morgans Hotel Group, whose other properties include the [Mondrian](#) in Los Angeles. Rates start at \$199. And a new W Retreat & Spa (877-946-8357; www.whotels.com) is opening on [Vieques](#) in February, starting at \$499.

St. Kitts

There has been no significant resort development on the island, but thrill-seekers will be happy to know about the new Sky Safaris St. Kitts Ziplining Tour (869-466-4259; www.skysafaristkitts.com). Based on the Wingfield Estate, an old sugar plantation, the tours are set on five different zip lines and vary in length and speed. They are eco-friendly (cables are rock-anchored) and are packed with historical information.

Delta, which currently runs a Saturday flight to St. Kitts from Atlanta, will add a nonstop Wednesday departure out of Atlanta beginning on Dec. 23.

St. Lucia

On March 2, Hotel Chocolat, the British cocoa grower and chocolatier that owns the 140-acre Rabot Estate, a cocoa plantation dating from 1745, is opening a 10-room boutique eco-hotel on the estate to house cocoa-themed wellness retreats. A restaurant serving cocoa-inspired dishes (example: roasted kingfish with cocoa nib crust), and a bar, both called Boucan, are planned, as well as a pool and massage pavilion. Rates will be about \$700 a night per room. For more information, e-mail: thehotel@hotelchocolat.co.uk.

Bargain hunters may be interested in the special rates at the [Windjammer Landing Villa Beach Resort](http://www.windjammer-landing.com) (877-522-0722; www.windjammer-landing.com). If booked before Jan. 15, rates will be discounted up to 50 percent in January (starting at \$199 per room) and up to 40 percent from February to April 14 (starting at \$239 per room).

Last month, JetBlue began offering direct flights from Kennedy Airport every Monday, Thursday and Sunday.

St. Thomas

The [Wyndham Sugar Bay Resort and Spa](http://www.wyndham.com/hotels/STTSB) (340-777-7100; www.wyndham.com/hotels/STTSB) is offering a one-day volunteer trip for \$79 to Hassel Island, where participants will collect flotsam and trim bushes along hiking trails in addition to kayaking, swimming and visiting historic sites.

Starting on Dec. 19, USAirways will offer flights departing Saturdays from Boston. Meanwhile, Delta has ramped up service to 26 flights a week out of Atlanta and seven flights a week out of Kennedy Airport.

Turks and Caicos

Gansevoort has opened its first Caribbean property, Gansevoort Turks + Caicos (877-774-3253; www.gansevoorttc.com). Visitors to the 91-room luxury hotel won't have any problem finding the pool — all 7,000 square feet of it — and the stressed can take refuge in the Exhale Spa and fitness center, which has a beachfront yoga pavilion. Nightly rates start at \$450 a person (for about \$30 more, the Steal Away package includes a room upgrade, cocktails, 35 percent off spa services and a yoga class).

The Veranda Resort and Residences (877-945-5757; www.verandatci.com) opens on Feb. 1. The 10-acre resort, set on 800 feet along Grace Bay Beach, features eight villa-type buildings, each with a private pool. There are also a spa, a 200-seat beachfront restaurant and a children's club. All-inclusive introductory rates — offered at a 30 percent discount through April 10 — start at \$630 per room.

Cruises

Several new megaships are sailing in the Caribbean for the first time.

Measuring at 225,282 tons is Royal Caribbean International's 5,400-passenger Oasis of the Seas (www.oasisoftheseas.com). Currently the largest cruise ship in the world, it will begin voyages out of Fort Lauderdale next month. With onboard zip-lining, a water-based outdoor theater and a park with real grass and trees, it may not matter to passengers where the ship is headed, but it will dock in the ports of St. Thomas, St. Martin/St. Maarten and Nassau, through April.

The 3,646-passenger Carnival Dream — Carnival Cruise Lines' (www.carnival.com) largest ship to date, with a wraparound promenade and a 23,750-square-foot spa — will begin year-round Caribbean service out of Port Canaveral next month.

The 2,850-passenger Celebrity Equinox (www.celebritycruises.com), virtually a twin of the Celebrity Solstice, will make its Caribbean debut this month with 10- and 11-night itineraries out of Fort Lauderdale that include stops in [Dominica](#) and St. Kitts.

Those looking for a more intimate experience might consider flying to St. Martin/St. Maarten to board Windstar Cruises' 148-passenger Wind Spirit (www.windstarcruises.com), which departs once a week on a new seven-day itinerary that includes stops in Virgin Gorda and [Jost Van Dyke](#).