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There's much to be said for a spring vacation to the Caribbean. Great weather, for one thing: average April temperatures in the Caribbean vary from daytime highs in the upper 80s to evening lows in the 70s. With tourist traffic on the wane, everything is a bit more relaxed, a bit quieter, with beaches that are yours for the taking. In spring, there are a series of festivals that reflect the islands' multicultural traditions, some going back hundreds of years. And there are savings to be had, deeper than in years past, as airlines and hotels look to attract sun-seeking travelers during the start of the "shoulder" season.

Desert Island Dreams

We've all imagined it: a vacation on a private island or secluded beach, just you and the sun-bleached sands and the rolling surf. Traveling to the Caribbean in spring, when the peak season hordes are just starting to thin, is the time when escapist dreams are realized.

Experienced beachcombers say that Loblolly Bay Beach on the coral island of Anegada in the British Virgin

Islands (BVI) is what island fantasies are made of. The eight-mile stretch of sugar sand is known for its immense barrier reef, spectacular sunsets and beachside hammocks shaded by lush canopies of seagrape trees. Head to the left of Big Bamboo restaurant and you'll find a reef area in the middle of a lagoon concealing three isolated caves and a wreck to explore. Steer a course in either direction along the blissfully uninhabited beach and you're likely to

find a secluded spot where no human being is visible to the eye.

Another contender is South Peninsula in St. Kitts, accessible only by boat until a few years ago. Today a modern highway brings the island's most beautiful, pristine beaches within reach. Keep a watch out for the black-faced vervet monkeys that live in this remote region.

Princess Diana, in her quest to escape the paparazzi, vacationed four times in Barbuda, a 20-minute prop plane ride from big-sister isle Antigua. Visitors land in a largely untouched universe, a low-rise landscape with only a smattering of hotels and guest cottages and about as many restaurants as you can count on one hand. The miles of unspoiled beach between Palmetto Point and Coco Point is as peaceful as it gets — your own private paradise — where vistas of ocean and sea converge and pink-hued beaches are all but deserted.

Where Food Meets Culture

The Caribbean is where food and culture meet, where stories of a rich and diverse heritage are revealed in a fusion of flavors and heady aromas, creating a cuisine that is wholly intriguing and completely its own.

Call it sensory sightseeing. At Angelica's Kitchen in Curaçao, culture and gastronomy merge in owner Angelique Schoop's walking tour through bustling Willemstad, capital of the Netherlands Antilles. Established in 1634, when the Dutch captured the island from Spain, both colonial influences can be seen in the city's architecture as well as the food that is eaten there.

Visitors are guided through the historic centers of the city, stopping at the Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Synagogue in the Hanchi di Snoa, the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the Western Hemisphere. Ingredients for lunch are purchased at the colorful, waterfront Floating Market (so called because fruits, spices and vegetables sold there have been "floated" to Curaçao from Venezuela).

Then it's back to Ms. Schoop's inviting kitchen to try your hand at preparing several dishes, such as salt cod salad with plum tomatoes, avocados and Madame Jeanette pepper, that showcase her signature blend of western European and Caribbean flavors.

Perhaps Jamaica's most popular

*The warmth
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time of year.*

export, jerk cooking is steeped in legend. The distinctively seasoned mixture of pimento (allspice) and peppers is believed to have originated with the Maroons — runaway slaves — to preserve meat while hunting for wild pigs in the hills. A 30-minute drive outside Ocho Rios takes you to a hands-on history lesson: the Jerk Country Tour in the village of Walker's Wood, where visitors sample some of the piquant flavors of the region and learn to concoct their own jerk rubs using an array of herbs and spices.

Natural Wonders

The Caribbean seems to have been blessed with more than its fair share of nature's spoils: vibrant flora, abundant wildlife, verdant jungles and everywhere, those crystal-clear turquoise waters. Some are just heavenly to look at. And then there are those earthly wonders that take your breath away.

The immense granite boulders at The Baths in Virgin Gorda, the third largest of BVI's islands, are as mysterious as the enormous monoliths at Stonehenge in England. Unlike Britain's marvel, this is entirely the work of Mother Nature: a pile-up of boulders, smooth as riverbed stones, some as large as your home, that create a maze of caves, caverns and tidal pools filled with marine life. The only things manmade here are the wooden ladders, catwalks and bridges that lead you through hidden grottoes and to a lovely U-shaped beach on Devil's Bay.

The famous cenotes — ancient freshwater sinkholes — of Mexico's Riviera Maya are a natural treasure, and the entrance to one of the largest underground river systems on the

planet. Just a short distance from popular resort areas, you embark on a magical, subterranean journey through huge chambers, stalactite-studded tunnels, highly decorated caves and swimming holes, some hundreds of feet deep. The Maya regarded them as sacred places, representing the portal to the underground world.

There's no other word for St. Lucia's Diamond Waterfall than resplendent. It sparkles with color throughout the day, from yellow to black to green to grey to purple as the water, coming from underground sulfur springs, cascades over mineral-encrusted rocks. While there, take in the lush tropical foliage of the

botanical gardens and another delight derived from nature: the mineral baths, originally built by French King Louis XVI in 1784 for therapeutic use by his troops fighting in the West Indies. Be prepared for a sultry soak: the average temperature of the water is a heated 106 degrees.

Jamaica, too, has its share of jaw-dropping waterfalls. Albeit touristy, Dunn's River Falls in Ocho Rios is something to behold — and climb, with the help of other swimsuit-clad visitors who form a human chain, holding the hands of those above and below them. YS Falls on Jamaica's lesser-traveled south coast provides a more tranquil spot, with its seven-tiered waterfall and expansive wading pool fed by underground springs. For the adventurous, try going airborne, zipping through the sky on a heart-pounding canopy ride suspended 40 feet above the cascading waters.

And if that isn't enough of a thrill, head over to Stingray City off the northwestern tip of Grand Cayman Island for a face-to-fish adventure with dozens of relatively tame Atlantic Southern stingrays. Touch them, feed them, snorkel or walk right up to them — these rare, human-loving creatures swim freely around you in only three to five feet of water.

Best Bets for Spring Travel

Sound advice for those ready to get packing: take advantage of seasonal savings and promotions, which are plentiful this time of year.

"Value continues to be key in travelers' decision making," says Hugh Riley, the interim secretary general of the Caribbean Tourism Organization. "The current trend is on value-added resort packages offering, perhaps, free nights, daily breakfasts, spa credits and complementary intra-island transportation."

Sandals Resorts (www.sandals.com) include 12 properties in Jamaica, Antigua, St. Lucia and the Bahamas. Along with luxury accommodations, unrivaled water sports (including the Caribbean's largest

PADI certification program), personal butlers, white-glove dining, Preston Bailey Signature Wedding-Moons® and pampering treatments at signature Red Lane® Spas, guests are offered a choice of gourmet à la carte restaurants serving all premium brand wines and spirits, including those from an exclusive partnership with California's Beringer Vineyards.

Book by April 30 for travel through December 26, 2009, and you can enjoy savings of up to 60 percent

off regular rates (minimum three-night stay required) and up to three-nights free on seven-night stays in select room categories at all properties.

The Iberostar hotel group (www.iberostar.com) has put together a "Stimulus Package" for three of its properties — the Grand Hotel Paraiso in Mexico, Grand Hotel Bávaro in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, and Grand Hotel Rose Hall in Jamaica. The package features chocolate-covered strawberries, flowers, champagne, a romantic dinner and breakfast in bed, which may not stimulate the economy, but certainly excites those looking for a vacation with all the luxuries fine travel has to offer.

Iberostar's "Grand Collection" of adults-only resorts boasts five-star amenities such as beck-and-call butlers, sumptuous buffets and restaurants, on-site PADI Gold Palm dive centers, golf, spas, tennis, yoga and scores of extras. The package also includes a \$150 resort credit, one complimentary round of golf and free room upgrades, if available. Book by June 15 for travel through September 15, 2009 (call 888-923-2722 and reference the package).

One of the newest and most impressive additions to Hilton Hotels is the oceanfront Rose Hall Resort & Spa in Jamaica (www.rosehallresort.com). Reopening last year after an extensive \$40 million renovation, the 400-acre resort offers outstanding activities including the largest water park in the Caribbean, Sugar Mills Falls; the highly-rated Cinnamon

Hill Golf Course designed by Robert Von Hagge; and its large, lush Soothe Spa.

Book the "Winter Escape" package for travel through April 30, 2009, and earn a \$50 resort credit for every two consecutive nights of your stay (no maximum limit).



Spring 2009

Caribbean Calendar of Events

St. Croix Food & Wine Experience

April 14-18, 2009

Draws more than 50 local chefs and many international vintners. Includes gourmet dinners, wine seminars, parties, meet-and-greets with celebrity chefs and sampling throughout the island.

www.stcroixfoodandwine.com

Tobago Jazz Experience

April 22-26, 2009

Top performers from Tobago and sister island, Trinidad. Features the innovative jazz played on steelpan for which Tobago is famous. Other events include music on the beach and Jazz Caravan with Grammy-winning recording artist, George Benson, as headliner. **www.visittobago.gov.tt**

Antigua Sailing Week

April 25-May 1, 2009

Gathers hundreds of seafarers for windward/leeward races, a race around the island and tacking duels around the buoys. On land, the week offers a cavalcade of beach and crew parties with plenty of barbecue and rum punch. **www.sailingweek.com**

Cayman Carnival Batabano

April 25-May 2, 2009

A cultural festival of flamboyant costumes and floats, live music, street dancing and parades.

www.caymancarnival.com

Curaçao Dive Festival

May 15-30, 2009

Diving presentations at numerous resorts, a hands-on marine arts clinic, early-morning guided dives and a sunset barbecue. **www.curacaodive.com**