

Star at sea

A tall-ship island-hopping escape provides the ideal introduction to the Caribbean for first-time visitor **Mary Novakovich**



Odd as it may sound in the travel industry, there are some people who have never been to the Caribbean. Until recently, I was one of them. I'm not sure why it has taken me so long – perhaps the bewildering number of ways of exploring the Caribbean blinded me.

Not a fan of large cruise ships, I wanted something more intimate, so a tall-ship cruise through the Leeward Islands with Star Clippers instantly appealed. *Star Flyer* carries just 166 passengers, docks in smaller ports and would give me a slow-paced introduction to this extraordinarily diverse region.

ISLES OF ADVENTURE

On a round-trip sailing from the Dutch-French island of Saint Martin, the ship called at Barbuda, Dominica, Guadeloupe, Antigua and St Barts. Sint Maarten, the Dutch side of our departure island, and particularly capital Philipsburg and its duty-free shops, seemed

geared largely towards cruise passengers. Its Rainforest Adventure park, however, with panoramic hilltop views and a fun zipline, was worth a visit. The French side, Saint Martin, and its capital Marigot had more charm, especially around its lively market and food stalls.

As we sailed to Barbuda, the low, unbroken landscape stood out amid this region of rugged volcanic islands; 95% of its infrastructure was destroyed in 2017 by Hurricane Irma. A tender dropped me off on Pink Sand Beach where the ship's crew had brought paddleboards and kayaks – a perfect chance for this inexperienced kayaker to paddle past virtually empty shores. It certainly felt like a castaway-style Caribbean experience.

Next, a tantalising taste of Dominica whetted my appetite for more of this green, mountainous island. I joined an organised excursion for a boat trip along the Indian River near Portsmouth, where Basil the boatman led us along a tranquil stretch ➤

DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | CRUISE



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pigeon Point Beach, Antigua; *Star Flyer*; boating on Dominica's Indian River; climbing the mast

PICTURES: Emily Tyler Photography; Mary Novakovich; Shutterstock/Andmir



of water bursting with greenery. From his post astern the brightly painted wooden boat, he pointed out the rundown waterside shack better known as Calypso's Hut from *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Chilled out by the soothing boat ride, I carried on relaxing on Purple Turtle Beach near Cabrits National Park, where a herd of goats ambled along the road behind me, and I got to know a friendly group of Austrian and German fellow passengers over bottles of Carib beer and swims in clear waters.

FROM SCREEN TO SHORE

I thought Dominica was a delight, but then the ship docked near Terre-de-Haut, one of Guadeloupe's Isles des Saintes, and I fell in love with this minuscule French outpost. Against a backdrop of forested hills and narrow roads lined with colourful wooden bungalows, it looked as if every dinky French seaside village I had ever seen had been plonked under the Caribbean sun. There was even a lovely sandy beach, Anse du Fond Curé, near the pier. Later, I took the tender to uninhabited islet

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Cabrit where I snorkelled and swam until the sun began to dip.

Rain put a damper on the following day's stop at Deshaies, the small Guadeloupe town where BBC1's *Death in Paradise* is filmed. At that time of morning, the town's vibrancy was muted by the leaden skies and its beach cafes (including Le Madras, also known as Catherine's Bar in the TV series) resolutely shut. If the weather hadn't been so gloomy, I would have enjoyed the half-hour walk to the Jardin Botanique de Deshaies, also available via a guided excursion.

The return of blue skies when we arrived in Antigua coincided neatly with the beach barbecue put on by the crew of *Star Flyer* on Pigeon Point Beach, near Falmouth

Harbour. The afternoon passed in a pleasant haze of eating great food, paddleboarding, swimming and lazing on soft, fine sands.

After such an enjoyably rustic experience, I thought St Barts would be impossibly chic in comparison. Yes, its deliberately understated deli was selling pots of Greek yoghurt for €24, but Shell Beach – true to its name, made up of tiny, pearl-like shells – was wonderfully unpretentious and a joy to swim in.

SAIL OF THE CENTURY

As I dipped in and out of these island scenes, I realised life on board *Star Flyer* perfectly suits this laid-back, leisurely meandering. The four-masted barquentine truly was beautiful, and the hoisting of its sails became a daily spectacle set to Vangelis's *Conquest of Paradise*, the theme to the Ridley Scott film *1492*. This is a proper sailing ship, and the romance factor outweighed its compact cabins and multitude of stairs (a point worth noting for clients with limited mobility, though).

The crew were unfailingly cheerful and helpful, and the food

was of a very good standard, enhanced by themed Caribbean, Italian and Asian buffet lunches.

Holidaymakers who want a bells-and-whistles cruise ship with pools, waterslides, casinos and a huge choice of dining probably wouldn't enjoy this pared-back sailing ship with only two small plunge pools. The fleet's biggest vessel, *Royal Clipper*, has a marina on its stern for swimming when the ship anchors, which would have been useful on *Star Flyer* had the ship's design allowed for it.

But lying on a sunlounger gazing at the stars after days spent exploring the Caribbean's quieter ports had its own magic. For my first taste of the region, I chose well. **TW**

BOOK IT

Star Clippers has a seven-night Leeward Islands sailing on *Star Flyer* from £1,950 per person, based on two sharing a category-six cabin and including £170 port charges, for a January 2 departure from Sint Maarten. Flights and transfers cost extra. starclippers.co.uk