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PLAN B FOR THE CARIBBEAN

Pristine sand an antidote to crowded beaches

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It's time to discover alternative Caribbean beaches that aren't so well known — or well trod.

BY DAVID SWANSON
SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

So many Caribbean beaches, so little time. But as high season approaches and island aficionados dive in for a dose of winter sunshine, the region's most popular, most famous sandscapes start to lose a bit of their luster.

Travelers often exhibit a pack mentality. But when you picture the beach of your dreams, is it jammed with wall-to-wall bodies and buzzing Jet Skis?

Okay, maybe it is.

There's nothing wrong with Plan A. But while the tried and true is often a great pick, here are a few alternatives.

SNORKELING BEACH


Plan A: Surely Trunk Bay on St. John ranks as one of the region's great scene stealers — a generous mantle of sand facing a panoply of Virgin Islands bulging on the horizon.

Between these points is a marked snorkeling trail that's ideal for newbies; a stand rents gear and National Park rangers keep things safe. But maybe you didn't expect the crowds?

Plan B: Most of Vieques, just off Puerto Rico, is overseen by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The former military property is lined with one undeveloped beach after another. Blue Beach is a sinuous three-quarter-mile long ribbon of plush silica and placid water.



Carriacou, an island in the Grenadines, has a small collection of rustic inns, and beaches set against a backdrop of neighboring islands. David Swanson

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Snorkelers will find great sightseeing on Isla Chiva, the cayo that's a short swim from the beach.

Stay: On a hillside facing the sea, 17-room Hacienda Tamarindo is a three-story, Spanish-style inn wrapped around a 200-year-old tamarind tree. Ask them to pack a hefty box lunch for your beach picnic. From \$135; 787-741-8525; www.haciendatamarindo.com.

BARGAIN BEACH

Plan A: Negril's Seven-Mile Beach on the western tip of Jamaica is the Caribbean's original laid-back, chill-out hideaway, drawing the young and open-minded with its freewheeling spirit and classic sunsets. It's still one of the region's most inviting locales, but as many of the small funky inns of old have been replaced with big resorts, prices have headed north.

Plan B: The Dominican Republic has prospered with its bounty of inexpensive all-inclusive resorts, but it's Cabarete I head to for excellent value in lodging, found in an array of both all-inclusive resorts and smaller traditional room-only hotels. Located 14 miles east of Puerto Plata, Cabarete's beach is renowned for its superior kite-boarding conditions, while a variety of adventure activities is available including mountain biking, white-water rafting and canyoning. The beachfront restaurants welcome barefoot dining; the youthful scene is easy-going, unpressured.

Stay: Situated at the quieter east end of town, Velero Beach Resort is an attractive collection of 60 privately-owned condos, ranging from standard hotel-style rooms to two- and three-bedroom units with all the frills. Cabarete has cheaper options, but Velero is a solid value, starting from \$114; 809-571-9727; www.velerobeach.com.

ARCHIPELAGO

Plan A: The British Virgin Islands have the market cornered when it comes to an idyllic island chain of 60-some landings, many of them uninhabited, most of them boasting postcard-perfect coves. But as the destination has embraced cruise ships during the last decade, day use has exploded and finding the beach to call your own has become more of a challenge.

Plan B: Farther south, the Grenadines unfurl from the southern tip of St. Vincent like tassels on the tail of a kite, an archipelago of secret landings, many reached only by sea. Most famous is Mustique, a celebrity haunt with pockets of sand secreted in the bends of the coastline (splurge and rent Mick Jagger's home). The Tobago Cays is a quintet of uninhabited outcrops fringed with pearlescent sand and snorkel-ready reefs. With 5,000 residents, Bequia is the most populated Grenadine, with sweet bays overlooked by inexpensive inns.

Stay: A privately owned 115-acre island, Petit St. Vincent boasts a velvety carpet of white sand stretching almost unbroken for nearly two miles. The 22-unit resort provides one of the Caribbean's most pitch-perfect escapes. From \$1,050 including meals; 800-654-9326; www.psvresort.com.



CLOTHING-OPTIONAL

Plan A: St. Martin's Orient Bay is easily the Caribbean's most famous nudie beach. It's quite the scene, with barbecue shacks and at least a half-dozen chi-chi beach bars hopping throughout the day, and plenty of motorized watersports. In reality, birthday suits are generally worn only at the south end — that would be the side with the parking lot where cruise ship visitors in taxi vans circle for a peek. Perhaps you were anticipating a little more solitude?

Plan B: Look no farther than the next island over, St. Barthélemy, where wild and undeveloped Anse de Grande Saline is the answer to a beach-lover's most sybaritic dreams. Even on the busiest days it's never packed, and privacy is paramount. From the parking area, a quarter-mile trail leads over a shrub-lined dune to the sand, which is soft, wide and generous. As the island's de facto clothing-optional beach, there are subsections within — hip/gay tend to swing left, newcomers usually head right. It's also probably the favorite of locals, and lots of networking takes place — play your cards right and you might be invited to a party.

Stay: Saline is blissfully free of development, but Salines Garden Cottages is just a 10-minute walk from the parking area. Here, five cozy wooden cottages in a rustic Creole style surround a small pool. From \$135; 011-590-590-51-04-44; www.salinesgarden.com.

HIDEAWAY BEACH

Plan A: Grace Bay on Providenciales in Turks and Caicos was my go-to spot for long beach strolls — immaculate sand framed by tourmaline waters on one side, gently bobbing sea oats on the other. It's posh and lovely today, but the dramatic ramp-up of resorts in the last two decades means little of Grace Bay is un-built and five- and seven-story resorts lord over the dunes.

Plan B: Some 700 outposts make up the Bahamas, but Eleuthera holds the distinction of being both one of the chain's largest islands as well as one of its least-visited. Through a confluence of boom-and-bust real estate projects, addled by the occasional tempest, Eleuthera has spent the last decade flying under the radar. The gangly island is 112 miles long, much of its fringed with roseate beaches, yet at any given time the number of visitors is generally counted in the hundreds. You do the math. If I had to pick one I'd aim for gorgeous Lighthouse Beach, untouched and often people-free. Except for me.

Stay: Close to Governor's Harbour, Cocodimama Charming Resort is a polished beachside inn with 12 fresh, airy accommodations in two-story cottages close to the water's edge. The restaurant's Bonfire Sundays involve dancing on the beach. From \$195; 877-666-9294; www.cocodimama.com.

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