

## Plights of the Caribbean

Words like “vacation” or “island-time” surround the Caribbean. We think of the white sand beaches, sunshine, rum- all the cliches. If you ever find yourself forced to move there, though, these thoughts may begin to fade in the relentless sun. My move came with all the adjustments and frustrations that any move to a different country will have. Accents you barely understand, getting lost each time you leave your house for the first month, and sometimes driveways that are paved with what seem like the sharpest of pebbles, stabbing the arch of your feet. You won’t realize it then, but all those things are shaping you to fall in love with a place you might think you hate. Living on a tiny island in the Caribbean for eight years will teach you how to embrace things you never thought you would. But that feeling will not come overnight. Somewhere along the line, those annoying sharp pebbles you step on will begin to turn to silky sand beneath your feet.

Running around Barbados you will notice kids clad in brightly coloured formal uniforms. At St. Ursula’s Convent, a white blouse, black polished shoes, a plaid tie and matching plaid skirt that must be knee length or longer, comes off particularly Celtic. What you will learn about the island is, it, like much of the Caribbean, is very much behind the times. A cut or scrape in the schoolyard will be met with the gooey redness of Mercurochrome<sup>1</sup>. And you’ll realize you weren’t at all aware that people still watched *Days of Our Lives*, until a local becomes your best

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<sup>1</sup> Mercurochrome is a topical antiseptic that is no longer sold in many countries including the United States due to its mercury content.

friend. This little limestone island in the middle of the sea is stuck in a 1950's reality, just equipped with the knowledge that a modern world still exists just past the horizon.

Like anywhere you live, you'll usually be able to find the more crowded scenes on the weekends. Oistins fish market on the South Coast is up and running at seven a.m. on a Saturday. Thin, old men carrying large loads of fish on their backs, glistening in the sun. Ladies at the stands calling you over to buy, hitting the wooden tables to get your attention. Boats with flaking paint pulling up onto the beach just behind the market. Everyone is hard at work and enjoying it too. But you might be so busy trying to phase out the noise, that you don't even realize one day they're calling you over by name.

Bridgetown, the capital, is always busy. It feels like an actual city, like somewhere else, somewhere where everything you need is at your fingertips, not like an island where you're waiting for everything to be imported. Stores line the cracked streets, most looking the same except for different coloured signs. *Sale! First Floor for Rent! Rotis served hot!* The harbour and market are at the center, creating the heart of the tiny city. The streets are scattered with gum and oil stains and endless litter. You walk through droves of people hurriedly running errands or shopping. It's busy and humid, but everyone is on their way, carrying you along by their side.

Come nightfall on these weekends, the drinking age is sixteen, eighteen to buy. Partying on any given day, for any given reason is highly encouraged. Tourists puking on the sidewalks, girls in shirts they've mistaken for dresses stumbling through the clubs, and of course the drunk drivers swerving along the roads. There are what seem like some minor taboo practices here, like intoxicated driving, and each parish they drive through is named after a saint. Oh, except for one-Christ Church. There may be high school kids clubbing on a Saturday night, but everyone is at

Sunday's 10 a.m. mass. There might be a pull towards excessive alcohol and parties, but there's always a push towards the saint towns and restful Sundays the next day, perhaps in some sort of attempt to hold the balance that seems to keep the island afloat.

In the rainy season of the Caribbean, you'll be met by numerous visitors. Mosquitoes, centipedes, millipedes and cockroaches. The heat will draw them in and the humidity will keep them there. November will rain off and on, sending Bajans<sup>2</sup> fleeing for their homes at the slightest drizzle. August will blaze with fury and make the interior of your car feel like a leathery pizza oven. But year round, coming down the ABC highway that swoops you down to the Southernmost part of the island, you can get your daily fix of coconut water from the shirtless man beside his green cart and even greener pile of coconuts. He knows each car that pulls up, and happily walks over, machete in hand. And you're not even aware of it, but a smile creeps upon your face as you greet your friend.

When strangers pass, there are a couple phrases you will want to know very well: good morning, good afternoon and goodnight. You must recite the appropriate phrase to *whomever* you happen to pass in a building, the street or anywhere else. You don't have to smile or even pretend to be the least bit interested. You can hold the meanest snarl on your face as you say it, but just say it. Otherwise you will be given the looks of bewilderment, pure disgust, and the occasional grumbled insult. Although it may not always be genuine here, an attempt to acknowledge the strangers around you might not be the end of the world. So try it.

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<sup>2</sup> The people of Barbados, also called Barbadians.

The beauty is, if you have the time, you are welcomed to be a tourist for the day and indulge in what the island has to offer. The water, of course. The Caribbean sea could make a watery grave look like the comfiest casket. The aloof wild parrots, the non-aloof monkeys, quiet jungles of bearded fig trees and endless fields of sugarcane. The roads are broken and full of potholes the size of canyons. But take a drive out to the East Coast, where the traffic is gone and the wind picks up. When you reach the top of the cracked and crumbling road surrounding the rocky hills, it seems like you can see the whole island, and every bump feels worth it. It is.

Like the Caribbean waves that roll onto the beach, there is a push and pull that wears on you. When you move to a different country, you can obviously expect a change. A change in surroundings, a change in people, a change in culture, a change in how you're expected to act. There will not be a specific day where you sit down and look around and think, "this place isn't so bad." It will come slowly, like moss growing on a rock, like broken glass being worn by the sea. It will come when the sun finally tans your skin instead of burning it. It will come when the frustration of not understanding anyone's accent melts into relief when you finally do. It will come when you jump in the water and all the frustrations you once had make you laugh. Give it time, and you will be rocked by the waves into a state of endearment with wherever you've ended up.