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mayfair times

*ELIE SAAB: from Beirut to Bruton Street
PLUS: Middle East focus and the best of Marylebone*



CRYSTAL SPRINGS, BARBADOS

INSPIRED BY WIMBLEDON, JONATHAN WILEY ENJOYS TENNIS, PADDLE BOARDING AND POLO AT ONE OF BLUE SKY LUXURY'S FLAGSHIP VILLAS

Cradled by fleece blankets of Caribbean air as thick and comforting as banana bread pudding, I have a crab-like grip on the rubber handles of a giant red inflatable. I'm spinning faster and faster. Tethered to a speedboat, it cuts through the water like a sharp knife carving up a ripe mango and the west coast of Barbados is a flipbook of palm trees and golden caster sugar beaches.

Arms and legs are flailing in mid-air. With each twist and turn I can feel my dignity slipping and last night's rum punch is beginning to bite. The salty spray of the emerald sea kicks up at one side of my face like a tempestuous mule and the laughter of friends is buffeting me at the other. Suddenly I'm seven years old again; king of a mobile bouncy castle, my body ricocheting like ice in a cocktail shaker. We zip past the flamingo-coloured sun loungers of the iconic Sandy Lane resort – catnip for global celebrities from Jackie Kennedy to David Beckham – and minutes

later we're gliding towards a secluded cove. The roar of the engine dies, the whoosh of wave against honey-coloured rock returns and bathed in mid-morning sun, we swim towards our 12,000sqft villa retreat.

Designed by acclaimed British theatre designer Oliver Messel, Crystal Springs is the Grace Kelly of Blue Sky Luxury's vast collection of homes.

Characterised by muted pastel shades – Messel's signature colour was a light sage, known as "Messel Green" – it is a totem of understated elegance.

Built in the 1960s, it has been carefully restored in recent years and oozes charisma. Its 10 ensuite bedrooms sprawl across an estate which features a cinema, bar, fitness suite and infinity pool with mosaic tiles that shimmer like a glitterball.

Grand design touches – elliptical arches, jalousie shutters, coral stone walls, porcelain floors – are soft and

welcoming, in keeping with Messel's favoured "indoor-outdoor living", and a fitting nod to the kindly nature of Bajan people. There is no grit in the oyster here. It's a place of great harmony; between nature and nurture, past and present. Even streets and neighbourhoods – Flamboyant Drift, Glitter Bay – have a gentleness about them, resembling eccentric stage names or Elton John singles.

New luxury developments are often nestled between ramshackled homes, but there is no tension. How could there be? In a land where sugar has historically been king – each year Crop Over Festival is a riot of colour to mark the end of the cutting season – Bajans only seem to know sweetness and light.

"As a child I remember being told off I didn't speak to strangers on the way back from school," an islander tells me one night in the soft hilt many still mistake for Irish.

The appeal of Barbados is as clear as the water. Glorious weather is a given – asked about the temperature one day, a local replies "gorgeous" – and an active lifestyle and sense of fun, much like aged rum, is never far away.

It's not uncommon for islanders to wake at 4am to go running and when a watersports instructor tells me he was three when he started to surf, I'm not sure he's joking.

With 2021 declared as the "Year of Sport" there is a packed calendar of events. An inaugural Cycling Festival will take place in September – the same month as a Beach and Wellness Festival – and in October, there is a Barbados Beach Tennis Championship.

If variety is the spice of life, then Barbados is surely the merchant. Sunset yoga classes, reef night diving, watching race horses swim at dawn, the smorgasbord of fun seems endless. In an action-packed few days I try polo at the stylish Apes Hill Club (challenging but exhilarating),

charter a catamaran (Seduced Barbados) for a surreal afternoon snorkeling with turtles and seek out thrills as the villa's very own boatman provides a taste of tubing.

Activities can be arranged through Blue Sky Luxury's Concierge Can service and for those inspired by this month's championship action at Wimbledon, be sure to take advantage (ahem) of a private tennis lesson.

My coach, Alan Grogan, who trained alongside Greg Rusedski as a junior, has plenty of starry tales to dispense alongside technical tips.

A rotund Pavarotti, he tells me, famously refused to move from his spot on the baseline to return balls. Wilting in the heat, their session lasted all of 15 minutes.

Cricket will forever remain the number one sport, but the popularity of tennis is growing. The island has excellent facilities – including a David and John Lloyd Tennis Village – and earlier this year 24-year-old Darian King became the first ever Bajan to win an ATP World Tour match. "Young people now have an idol," says Alan. "There is a lot of interest in tennis at the minute." Paddle boarding is a popular pastime too; in October there is a Dragon World Championship which promises "fast, fun racing with a party vibe like no other."

Fittingly, my own experience involved a set of particularly shaky Elvis legs. Writing around the board with the grace of an albino seal, I did manage to stand tall eventually. Then a whisper of wind caught my legs and I flopped once more. "It just doesn't seem possible!" I whined, blaming the pesky rum once more. "You're in Barbados now," came the reply from my instructor, with a grin. "Everything is possible"

Crystal Springs is part of Blue Sky Luxury's portfolio of luxury villas (blueskyluxury.com) Visit crystalspringsbarbados.com/reservations Virgin Atlantic flies to Barbados daily from Gatwick (virginatlantic.com).

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