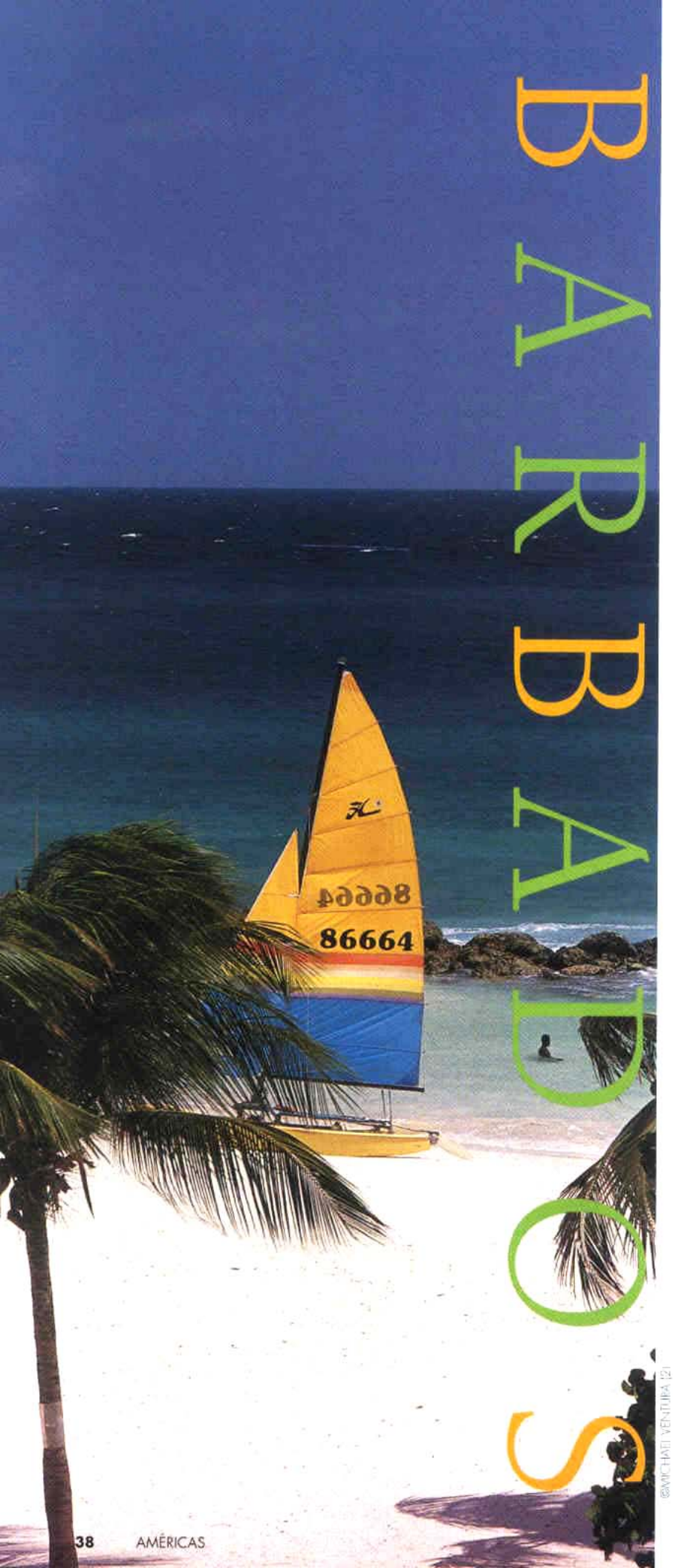
BARBADOS

THE CLIMATE OF SUCCESS

THIS SMALL CARIBBEAN NATION PLANS TO LURE A LARGE SECTOR OF THE TOURISM MARKET, WHILE OPENING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOREIGN INVESTORS

Text and photographs by Larry Luxner



which in early June will host the thirty-second General Assembly of the Organization of American States, is one of the tiniest of OAS member nations—and by far the most densely populated. Yet even though 275,000 people call this 166-square-mile island home, translating into an astounding 1,658 inhabitants per square mile, Barbados feels anything but crowded. Cruising along a rural, two-lane road in St. Andrew, one of the island's eleven parishes, it's hard to imagine a more remote place in the Caribbean. Wide vistas of golden sugar cane, an occasional abandoned windmill, and a bright blue sky characterize this place, where people drive on the left (this is "Little England," after all) and the natives are known as Bajans.

Barbados is also famous for its stunning plantation "great houses," white-sand beaches, mysterious caves, and expensive Mount Gay rum.

Indeed, as the travel brochures claim, Barbados really is a land of remarkable contrasts, from the craggy, desolate Atlantic coastline in the north to busy Bridgetown in the south—all on an island only twenty-one miles long and fourteen miles wide.

Originally settled by Arawak peoples moving north from South America's Orinoco region two thousand years ago, Barbados (whose name in Spanish means "the bearded ones") was essentially uninhabited by the time sixty white settlers and six African slaves arrived aboard the *William and John* in February 1627.

By 1639, the white population of Barbados stood at eighty-seven hundred, and by 1660, Barbados was completely deforested, with more than 90 percent of the island already devoted to the cultivation of sugar cane and other crops. The island's unusual flatness—a contrast to the mountainous topography of neighboring islands like St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Dominica—also permitted the development of an extensive road network that endures today.

"The island developed with astonishing rapidity, becoming the most prosperous seventeenth-century insular colony on the globe," write the authors of the travel book *Barbados: Just Beyond Your Imagination*. "The initial basis for capital accumulation was the growing and export of tobacco, which in the very short run proved immensely profitable, and laid the foundation on which subsequent economic activity was to build."

Largely thanks to its isolation in the eastern Caribbean, Barbados was never seized by French, Dutch, or Spanish forces, and is the only island in the entire Caribbean that remained under the British flag right up until independence in 1966.

This year, as Barbados marks the 375th anniversary of its colonization, its people have much to celebrate: a 98 percent literacy rate, an unbroken tradition of democracy, and an exceptionally high standard of living.

And despite nearly thirty-six years of independence from Great Britain, the island still enjoys a delightfully British atmosphere. A statue of Admiral Horatio Nelson graces Bridgetown's National Heroes Square, and afternoon tea remains a custom for many hotels on the west-coast Caribbean shores of St. James parish. The Anglican Church and that most English of sports—cricket—are both taken very seriously in Barbados, whose citizens place law and order, and God, above almost everything else.

Sir Courtney Blackman, who served as Barbados's ambassador to the United States for five years, from 1995 to 2000, attributes his island's success to its "remarkable" political stability.

"Since our independence, recrimination against the white minority [estimated at 4 percent of the total population] has been minimal," he says. "There's never been a political killing in Barbados. Even before independence, nobody could remotely be described as having been a political prisoner. Political stability is our most important characteristic."

Since 1641, Barbados has been neatly divided into eleven parishes: St. Lucy, St. Peter, St. Andrew, St. James, St. Joseph, St. Thomas, St. John, St. Michael, St. George, St. Philip, and Christ Church. The last one, Christ Church, is home to Grantley Adams International Airport, while St. Michael includes Bridgetown, the capital city.

Although the main attractions of Barbados can be seen in three days, there's no point in rushing if one doesn't have to. One of the best places to get a sense of the island's history is Tyrol Cot Heritage Village—a

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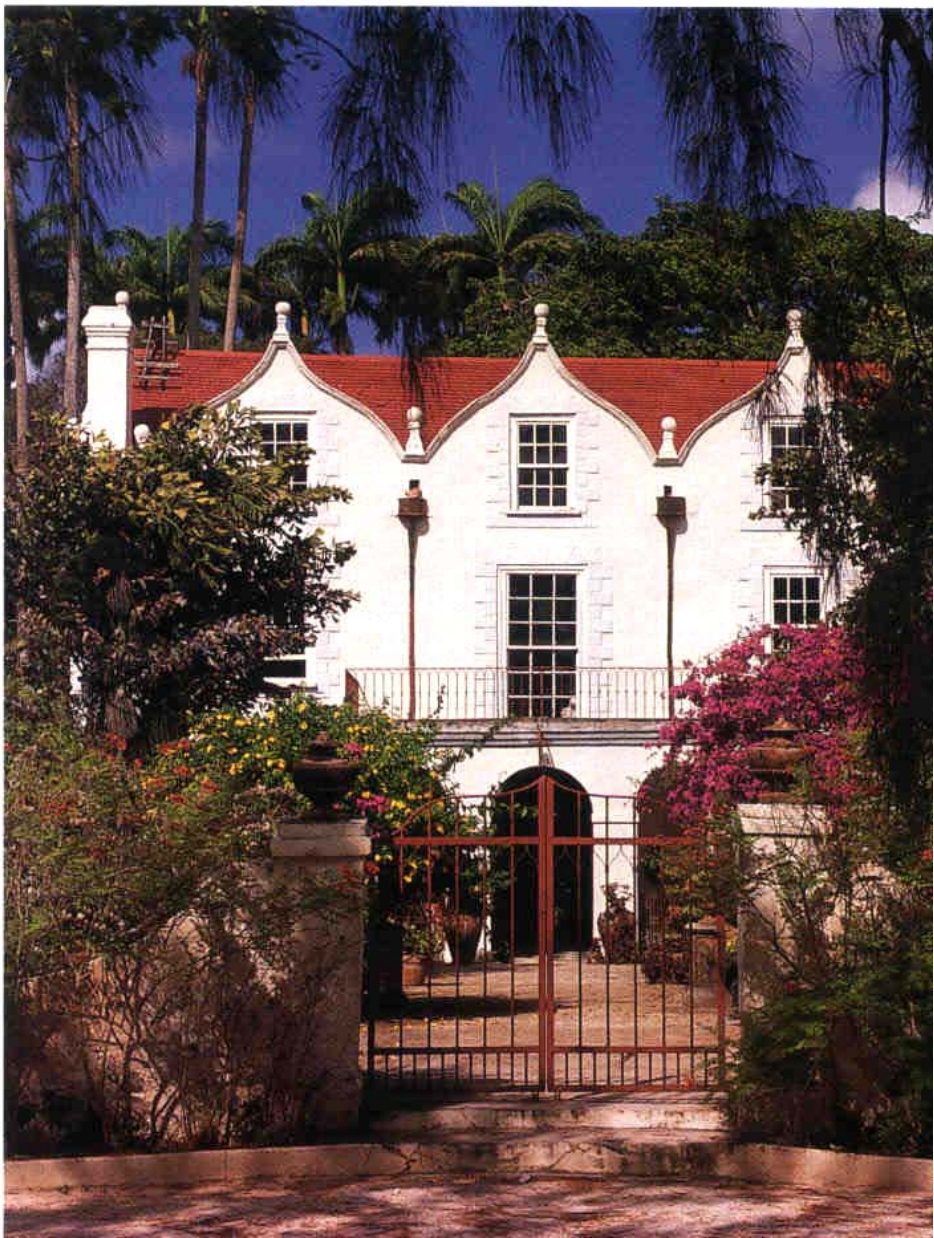

The rocky Atlantic coast near Bathsheba, overleaf, *contrasts with the tranquil Caribbean beaches of the southwest,* opposite. *In the parish of St. Peter, the Jacobean mansion of St. Nicholas Abbey,* below, *was home for ten years in the mid-1600s to Sir John Yeamans, a property speculator who left Barbados to become governor of the new colony of Carolina, where he helped lay out Charleston*

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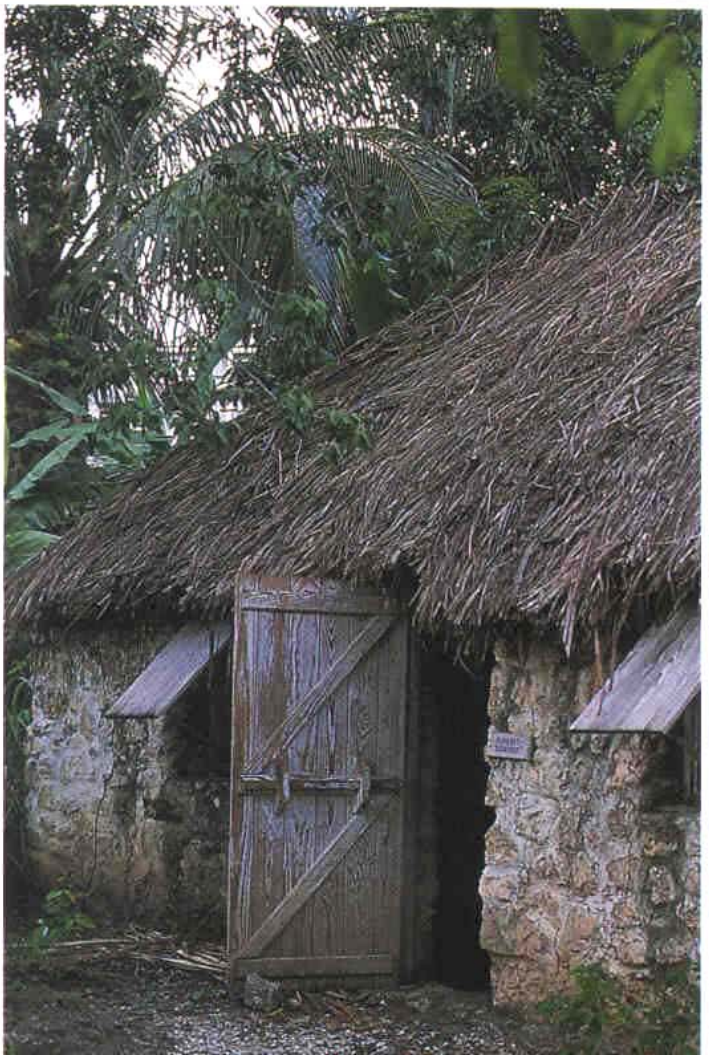


Barbados National Trust Heritage Site located just outside Bridgetown. Here, one can visit the home of Sir Grantley Adams—leader of the struggle for democracy in Barbados—as well as a craft village containing perfect replicas of that most unique icon of Bajan culture, the chattel house (the first house of a freed slave that over time evolved with its own style and architecture), as well as an 1820s-era slave hut, a traditional Cockspur rum shop, and a working blacksmith's shop.

Tyrol Cot, built in 1854 by William Farnum, was purchased in 1889 by Valdemar Hanschell, who in turn sold it in 1929 to Grantley Adams. The interior of the coral stone house is essentially as it was when Sir Grantley entered active politics in 1937. The house itself is built on one level, over a deep basement, in which Lady Adams and her young son Tom hid in 1937 from Sir Grantley's sometimes violent political opponents.

In the gallery is the politician's radio, which he used to listen to the BBC News. The bedroom of Tom Adams—who became prime minister of Barbados in 1976 and served until his death in 1985—is also carefully preserved, as is Sir Grantley's study, where tourists can see his legal books, his official license plate and the official flag of the short-lived West Indian Federation, of which Sir Grantley was the only prime minister.

A dress boutique managed by Sharon Knight, opposite top, *and a roadside rum shop on the outskirts of Bridgetown add splashes of color to the capital city. At Tyrol Cot Heritage Village, a replica of an 1820s slave hut recalls the island's colonial heritage, as does the 275-year-old Morgan Lewis Sugar Mill, the island's only remaining working windmill,* opposite bottom left and right. *Both are administered by the Barbados National Trust*

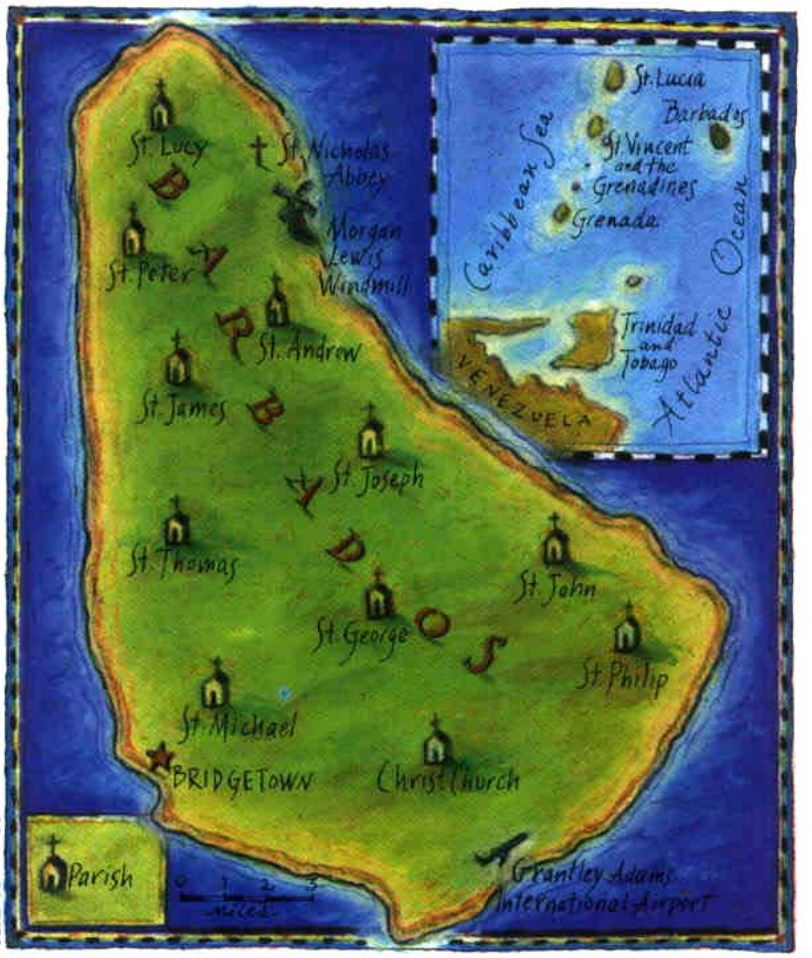
There's a historical connection between BARBADOS, New England, and Canada's Maritime Provinces . . . still strong rum consumption markets

At the northern end of Barbados is a "house" of a totally different kind—St. Nicholas Abbey. Despite its name, this was not an abbey, but a plantation great house built sometime between 1650 and 1660. It is said to be one of only three Jacobean plantation great houses left standing in the Western Hemisphere, the other two being Drax Hall (also in Barbados) and Bacon's Castle, which is in Virginia.

An oddity of St. Nicholas Abbey is the inclusion of fireplaces and chimneys—clearly unnecessary features for a climate as tropical as Barbados. The house was probably built for Colonel Benjamin Beringer, though owners and residents have come and gone through the centuries. Furniture of particular interest includes a grandfather clock that dates from 1759 and English porcelain dinner service manufactured in 1810.

Sugar has been grown at this plantation since about 1640 and is still grown today, the whole estate covering around 420 acres. After visiting St. Nicholas Abbey, tourists generally drive up to Cherry Tree Hill, from which they enjoy the spectacular view across the east coast of Barbados—said to be one of the finest views in the Caribbean.

In tranquil St. Philip, visitors may tour three-hundred-year-old Sunbury Plantation House, once known as Chapman's Plantation, which is even shown on several early maps of the island. In 1981, after a long and colorful history, the house was separated from the sugar plantation and sold to local entrepreneur Keith Melville. The Melvilles are both horse lovers, and what began as a hobby has grown into the island's most



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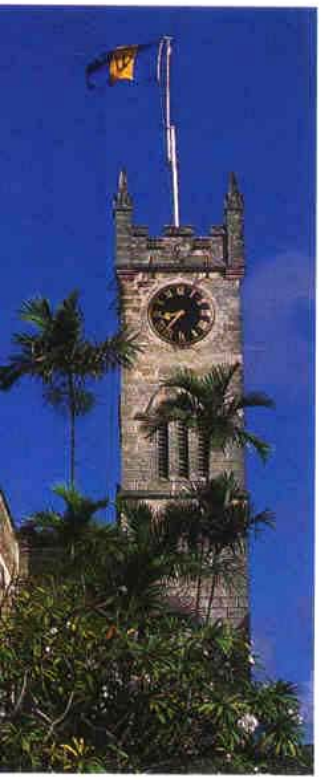

Cruise ships dwarf the port at Bridgetown, top, *as more tourists discover the hidden beauty of a country that harbors the internationally famed Mount Gay rum distillery,* bottom, *thriving fruit vendors,* opposite top, *and streamlined high-tech companies. Towering over them all is the Parliament building,* above, *a symbol of stability*

comprehensive collection of antique horse-drawn carriages and artifacts. The Melville family resided at Sunbury until 1985, when the old house was opened to visitors.

In Bridgetown, two historic structures are particularly worth seeing. The first is Bush Hill House, where nineteen-year-old George Washington resided for seven weeks in 1751 with his older brother, Lawrence—marking the only time the future president ever left the North American mainland in his life. The house, less than ten minutes from downtown, is currently under restoration and should be open to tourists next year.

The second site is the Synagogue, which dates from 1654 and is one of the oldest Jewish houses of worship in the Western Hemisphere. Restored in the 1990s, this Sephardic synagogue—used on special occasions by the tiny Jewish community of Barbados—has a beautiful interior graced by chandeliers and Torah scrolls. On its grounds is a cemetery with several hundred tombstones engraved in English, Portuguese, and Hebrew.

Another not-to-miss spot is the Mount Gay rum distillery. A favorite of the upscale U.S. boating and yachting community, this amber rum has been produced in the northern parish of St. Lucy since 1703, marking its three hundredth year in business next year.

"We sell over four million bottles annually, and we're growing," says Claire Jordan, former international brand manager at Mount Gay. "There's a unique historical connection between the islands, New England, and Canada's Maritime Provinces, when in the early days, codfish and other commodities were shipped to Barbados and we exported rum. Those areas are still pretty strong rum consumption markets."

Tourism is, of course, the mainstay of the Bajan economy, having replaced sugar long ago in importance. In 2001, just over 1.1 million tourists visited Barbados—the highest cumulative figure for arrivals ever, says tourism minister Noel Lynch.

In fact, Barbados is spending $100 million to upgrade its port facilities in order to keep up with a dramatic increase in the number of cruise ships on the island.

"The Caribbean commands 43 percent of the world cruise market, and Barbados is one of the better destinations in the region," says Victor R. Roach, deputy general manager of the Barbados Port Authority. "We have good airline connections, a first-class telecom system, and a stable government. The destination sells itself."

Visitors come not only for the tiny country's pristine beaches but also for other natural beauties, as well as famous festivals and events.

In mid-January, the island hosts the Barbados Jazz Festival, followed by the African Renaissance Dance Festival, and in late February the Holetown Festival, which commemorates the landing of the first settlers to Barbados at Holetown in February 1627. Highlights of the festival—now in its twenty-fifth year—include street fairs, the Royal Police Band concert, a musical festival in the historic Parish Church, and, of course, entertainment to select a festival queen.

Other annual events include the Holder's Opera Season, established in 1993 as one of the Caribbean's premier cultural events; the Oistins Fish Festival in late March; the nine-day De Congaline Carnival; the Barbados International Track & Field Classic in May; the June 19–26 Gospelfest; and of course Crop Over—the highlight of the Barbados cultural calendar.

Crop Over, which originated on the sugar plantation as a means of celebrating the end of sugar-cane harvest season, was revived in 1974 after a period of depression. It is marked by fairs, concerts, cart parades, and the crowning of the calypso monarch.

To accommodate its many festival goers, Barbados offers over five thousand hotel rooms, ranging from elegant resorts to intimate guest houses. The island's tourism infrastructure is quite sophisticated, allowing conventions and meetings to flourish at a host of internationally acclaimed resort hotels.

The Sherbourne Centre is known among the Caribbean's finest conference facilities, featuring state-of-the-art technology and twenty thousand square feet of meeting space for anywhere from fifty to a thousand delegates. The center has hosted a number of large conferences, including the UN Global Conference on Sustainable Development for Small Island States, the Caribbean Tourism Conference, and the recent CARICOM Heads of Government Conference.

Meanwhile, other fine island hotels have recently undergone renovation: the Crane Beach Hotel, a historic eighteenth-century mansion located on a particularly scenic patch of oceanfront land, the luxurious Colony Club, and nearby, the venerable Sandy Lane. In the interior parish of St. John, the Villa Nova Hotel is considered by many to be one of the most stunning of the island's traditional nineteenth-century plantation houses, and until recently, the property formed part of the Barbados National Trust's "Heritage Trail."

Tourism, which accounts for 15 percent of total gross domestic product (GDP) and directly employs over

twelve thousand workers, has been severely affected by the September 11 terror attacks, says Reginald Farley, Minister of Industry and International Business. To help the industry, Farley recently announced a $16 million intervention package, with the bulk of that money going to help the tourism sector. This includes $4.8 million for a new tourism marketing program, and a $10 million fund to assist hotels facing a loss of income.

Most tourists to Barbados come from Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and the other nations of the Caribbean. And, they tend to return to Barbados, explaining why the country has become such a successful tourist destination.

Michael King, Barbados's ambassador to the United States and the OAS, emphasizes that in addition to its tourism promotion, "Barbados is making great efforts to expand and strengthen its ties to the countries of Central and South America." These ties have existed since thousands of "silver-dollar men" left Barbados to dig the great canal in Panama at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Given its history, the solidarity Barbados showed the United States following the terrorist attacks shouldn't surprise anyone.

"Every time America's vital interests have been at stake, Barbados has been on her side," says former ambassador Blackman. "In the Revolutionary War, Barbados was very supportive of the colonies. The words 'taxation without representation' were heard in Bridgetown long before they were heard in Boston.

And Barbadians fought in both World Wars I and II, and in the Vietnam War." He adds: "The historical ties between our countries are considerable. Barbados is in the process of rekindling them. We want to preserve our heritage, and we find that it fits in beautifully with our tourism efforts."

Meanwhile, Barbados is working to reduce its economic dependence on sugar and tourism, by encouraging the development of manufacturing, information technology (IT), and other industries. Foreign IT firms with a presence in Barbados benefit from the island's educated labor force, lower wage scale, and are required to pay only a 2.5 percent tax on profits—which allows them to operate at a fraction of the cost back home.

Ambassador King points out that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which helps governments tackle the economic challenges of a globalized economy, has recognized that "Barbados's international banking and financial-service industry, where transactions are transparent and regulatory controls are effective, is better regulated than that of many of the thirty OECD member countries."

The IT and financial service sectors together generate $100 million a year in revenues, making them an important foreign-exchange earner, second only to tourism. To date, forty-five companies have set up shop here—many of them at the Harbour Industrial Estate complex in Bridgetown, which has been set aside exclusively for IT firms.

The Barbados Investment and Development Corporation (BIDC) oversees ten industrial parks with a combined 1.6 million square feet of available office space. "We are currently concentrating on manufacturing and information services," says chief executive officer E. Anton Norris, "including IT firms, call centers, and Internet-based operations."

Only a few years ago, these companies were limited to simple data entry, but are now moving into higher value-added forms of IT such as credit-card transactions, medical insurance claims processing, and software development.

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In September 2001, the government of Prime Minister Owen Arthur moved to liberalize the Barbadian telecom sector—a decision that promises to be a strong incentive for foreign investors to consider Barbados, making the former British colony an even more competitive place to do business.

"Competition will have a major impact on our promotional efforts," says BIDC's Norris. "Right now, the lack of competition is constraining more rapid expansion of business in Barbados, particularly in information-services companies that use telecom services."

The telecommunications monopoly long enjoyed by Cable & Wireless Ltd. (C&W) in Barbados will be gradually reduced over a twenty-one-month period due to end in August 2003. First to open up to competition will be mobile telephony, followed later by local and long-distance services.

C&W has invested over $125 million in the last five years to upgrade the local telecom network, and has spent $18 million to establish regional Internet and other value-added services that serve the entire Caribbean from Barbados. Those investments have given the 275,000 citizens of Barbados a telephone density of forty-five lines per hundred inhabitants—one of the highest teledensities in the Caribbean.

Clearly, this tiny island has very big plans, and Bajans are confident that there is plenty of room to grow. ■