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QUEEN OF THE CARIBBEAN

THE CRANE RESORT

BY MARK STEVENS

ON A CARPET OF GRASS HIGH ABOVE THE SEA, GUARDED BY A CORAL STONE BLOCK BALUSTRADE, A WHITE TRELLIS BEDECKED WITH FLOWERS TREMBLES IN THE TRADE WINDS SWIRLING ABOUT THE CLIFFS OF SOUTHWEST BARBADOS.

A priest grasps his fluttering white robe. The bride smiles at him, and at her new husband, and says, "I do."

It is a magical moment in a magical place. They're sharing their nuptials at the Crane Residential Resort on an undulating emerald island rich in culture and history, an island laying claim to such accolades as "the only place George Washington ever stayed outside of the U.S." This according to our guide at nearby Sunbury Plantation, a showplace of what the Caribbean used to be, the perfect microcosm of Barbados: a place with grace and charm but also a sense of history and its very own island rhythm.

Barbados could justly lay claim to the title of Queen of the Caribbean.

AN ANTILLEAN HALLMARK

And the crown jewel would be the Crane, a romantic setting high above sapphire white-laced seas, towering over an alabaster beach basking in the shade of royal palms sambadancing in synchronicity with those ubiquitous breezes.

An elegant sculpture overlooks a formal garden between the sea and a coral stone great house. Cedar shake shingles decorate its roof. Mahogany shutters frame its casement windows. A glittering pool sprouting Doric columns lazes in the omnipresent sun above the beach. "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous has rated that beach one of the world's top 10," says the Crane's owner, Canadian Paul Doyle.

It's one of my favourite Antillean hideaways, mostly because I love the tradition and history of the old Caribbean.

And this resort is a hallmark when it comes to history and tradition.

People have savoured this beach since the middle of the 18th century. The reef that creates those calming waters formed a natural harbour where commercial ships once off-loaded cargo. A crane once presided over the cliff now dominated by this elegant resort.

Nor does the sense of history end there. Donald Simpson bought the great house (formerly Marina Villa) and transformed it into a hotel in 1887. The Crane is reputedly the oldest continuing resort in the Caribbean.

FEASTS AWAIT

Sixty feet above the beach, wraparound French doors front onto the terrace at the Crane's L'Azure restaurant; they lead to graceful arches sheltering the entrance.

From our table we are treated to one of the most beautiful seascapes you can find anywhere on the island. And the food vies with the view.

We order the catch of the day—red snapper garnished with a mango salsa—and are served at a table festooned with flowers beside floor-to-ceiling windows.

The Zen, right next door, with its 12-person sushi bar and authentic Thai and Japanese cuisine (try their tasting menu) is another perfect option—twice Zagat-rated as No. 1 for dining in Barbados.

Tonight the Zen. But first a romantic interlude in our suite.

TIMELESS ELEGANCE

A louvered door opens onto our patio housing a private 8.5-metre pool. The seas, emerald and turquoise, form the perfect backdrop for an alfresco hot tub housed in a restored historic stable to our east, terraced infinity pools amid formal gardens punctuated by palms dead ahead.

The kitchen gleams with state-of-the-art appliances and granite counters. A living and dining area six metres long is softly lit by brass wall sconces. A hand-crafted mahogany dining table seats eight. Lumber tray ceilings of blond wood are almost four metres high.

Our bedroom boasts a four-poster mahogany king-size bed, a bathroom with a multi-jet shower and a two-person Jacuzzi.

Timeless elegance indeed.

But they have never been content to rest on their laurels here—improvements are dramatic and ongoing.



A COLONIAL GEM

A whole "village" comprises part of the property—modern and sophisticated but retaining both the elegance and majesty of the colonial gems scattered across the islands—replete with hurricane shutters and formal welcome-arm staircases, cobblestoned lanes and the warm glow of gaslights when the sun sets at last. In fact, nowadays you might never even need to venture to Bridgetown for your history or culture fix.

On Wednesdays Barbados comes to you with an open-air market of local arts, crafts and delicacies. Shops in the 5,110-square-metre space include the likes of Cave Shepherd, Colombian Emeralds and a duty-free shop. And should you need liquid nourishment, listen to jazz in Bar 1887 (one more sign of their respect for history and tradition: that's the year civil engineer Donald Simpson opened the resort). Do Italian at D'Onofrios for more substantial sustenance.

Then reward yourself with a soak in your own private plunge pool, or bask in the rays on your own oversize terrace.

ENDLESS CHOICES

Your only stress might be deciding on the perfect *pied-à-terre*. Check out the Residences by the Sea—from private garden-view accommodation to three-bedroom oceanview penthouses. How about the relative seclusion of the

Residences in the Park, ranging from one-bedroom suites to two-bedroom deluxe, each with its own garden pool? Or go with that love of history and book a room in the original great house—from standard to two-bedroom suites.

Or maybe purchase your own little patch of paradise? That way you can become a true "Crane person."

"There are two kinds of people in the world," says Doyle. "Crane people are quite content to watch the world pass from the comfort of their private plunge pool."

That night, torn between a plunge pool soak on our terrace watching a shimmering blanket of stars over the sea or soaking in the gargantuan Jacuzzi, I conclude that I am one of those people.

A loyal subject of the Queen of the Caribbean. ■



opposite, top: A sculpture of a crane presides over the property.

top: The east coast of Barbados is known for its magnificent rock formations and wide sandy beaches.

left: Crane Beach is ranked among the 10 best beaches in the world.

Sharon Matthews-Stevens

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more information on accommodation options, features and amenities at the Crane Residential Resort, check out thecrane.com. To explore Barbados further, log onto visitbarbados.org. Air Canada Vacations (aircanadavacations.com) offers packages to the Crane.