



## EXCURSION

# GRAND STRAND

Antigua's sister to the north, Barbuda is a little island with a very big beach.

MO SALLAH'S HEARD IT BEFORE. "Say 'Barbuda' and people respond 'Barbados?' And you say, 'No, Barbuda.' And they look at you like you're crazy and say, 'Bermuda?'" As the general manager of Barbuda's Lighthouse Bay Resort, the good-natured Sallah knows that this little island, pronounced *bar-BYOO-duh*, is off the map of most Caribbean travelers. And that's just fine with him and his guests. "The only thing you'll see on this sand," he says, "is your own footprints."

Antigua's little sister to the north, the island of Barbuda is undiscovered country even to many Antiguans. Its major export is sand. Barbuda's sand is so plentiful, in fact, so silky and white, that it's scooped up by the ton and used to sweeten beaches all over the Caribbean and as far north as Louisiana. There are just 1,500 people occupying the island's 62 square miles, and at least

Looking northward from Lighthouse Bay Resort, the beach — 17 unbroken miles from one end to the other — rolls on toward the mouth of Codrington Lagoon.

ZACH STOVALL



A Lighthouse Bay guest's first view of the sea comes through the lobby. Below: Horseback may be the best way to explore a beach this big.

bright-light near-death experiences to be. I'm willing to bet that every Barbuda virgin has a similar first-time encounter. Your eyes widen and your mouth falls open and you zombie-walk toward that impossibly luminous swath of blue and white. You stagger onto the sand and blink into the sunlight, looking up and down and left and right in unmitigated astonishment. Then, if you're me, you blurt out a favorite expletive and hear Mo Sallah laugh like the guy from the old 7UP commercials. "I get that a lot around here," he says.

Of course, this slice of perfection is priced accordingly: A night at Lighthouse Bay starts at a fairly breathtaking \$999 per room in low season (\$1,099 in high). There are less dear ways to experience the wonders of Barbuda. A handful of small guesthouses in and around the island's only village, Codrington, provide basic accommodations for less than \$100 a night. And, really, you don't have stay the night to get a satisfying taste of the place. Barbuda Express, which operates a once-daily catamaran ferry service between Antigua and Barbuda, offers a \$159 tour of the island that includes a boat ride through the frigate bird sanctuary, a visit to east-coast caves whose walls are adorned with ancient Arawak drawings, and lunch on the beach.



as many feral donkeys ambling around. There's a healthy population of deer and wild boar here too, both legally hunted. And there are birds, lots of birds — more than 170 avian species, including a 5,000-strong colony of frigate birds. About a third of the island is a dedicated sanctuary for this black-feathered seabird with a long tail and a seven-foot wingspan that seems to spend most of its day suspended on the breeze like a kite, sans string.

Most of Barbuda is encircled by a thriving coral reef system — great for snorkelers, less so for sailors (there are some 200 shipwrecks in these waters). Two-thirds of the island is comprised of sandy plains that sit just a few feet above sea level, but rocky beaches and

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rugged limestone cliffs as high as 135 feet dominate its Atlantic-lashed east coast. On the west side, a fine strip of land bows into the Caribbean like the handle of a teacup, lapped on one side by the brackish waters of a vast lagoon and fringed on the other by what just may be the most splendid beach on planet Earth. Fronting the humbly named Low Bay, it is 17 uninterrupted miles of sand so fluffy and white you

could bake a cake with it, and it's caressed by a swath of Caribbean Sea that's truer than true blue. And along these many, many miles, apart from the diminutive Lighthouse Bay Resort, you'll find not one hotel, villa, bar, restaurant or fishing shanty. *Nothing.*

My first glimpse of this beach, as a radiant square at the end of a column-lined passageway in the resort's open lobby, was sort of how I imagine those

Unfortunately, Codrington-based overnights can miss out on some of Barbuda's most majestic perspectives, and day-trippers arrive too late and leave too early to get the full effect. Sunrise from that long beach at Lighthouse Bay, for instance, when a looking-glass sea reflects an arching sky, and the sapphire blue of the wee hours gives way to the cotton-candy pink of dawn, may be as close to the divine as a mortal can get.

Approached by water taxi from Codrington, the nine-room resort looks for the world like some eccentric billionaire's private island citadel. Its namesake lighthouse contains a quaint bar at beach level and, on top, in place of a beacon, his-and-hers alfresco massage tables. There are no roads on (or to) this side of the lagoon; if you want to get around, the resort has a Hobie Cat, a couple of kayaks and a small herd of horses. The property generates its own electricity and desalinates its water. Everything you see — every brick, every bed, every beach towel, every bottle of beer — came across the lagoon one barge load at a time. It was like building a moon base.

Lighthouse Bay's amenities are top-shelf by most any measure. Sumptuous rooms feature vaulted ceilings and travertine marble floors and walls bedecked with original artwork. Wi-Fi and satellite TV and free international phone calls are nice, and the undivided attention of chef Lennox Cadogan doesn't hurt either. (His Barbuda lob-

ster and local venison with shrimp and toasted seaweed are not to be missed.) Simply arriving here is an exercise in extravagance: Lighthouse Bay provides a complimentary helicopter transfer from the airport in Antigua to its private helipad. "Step off your plane over there," says Sallah, "and you can be here, and on this beach, in 15 minutes."

It's tough to overstate the singularity of this scene: a beach so sublime and a lone resort whose excellence is worthy of the setting. Only 26 miles to the south sits one of the Caribbean's most popular and energetic destinations, but little Barbuda offers beachy solitude

on a scale we're really not accustomed to in the modern age. Yes, a sojourn at Lighthouse Bay Resort will strike more than a few travelers as a once-in-a-lifetime splurge. But when you plant your feet in this immaculate sand and gaze out over the water, when you see a piece of the Caribbean as Christopher Columbus saw it, or the Arawak before him, your time here starts to feel less like a splurge and more like what it really is: a privilege. — MATT PHENIX

*From \$999 per room, all-inclusive, in low season (\$1,099 high); 888-214-8552; lighthousebayresort.com*

**GET THERE** The cheapest way to get to Barbuda is aboard the Barbuda Express (268-560-7989; [antiguaferries.com](http://antiguaferries.com)), a catamaran ferry that makes the trip from Antigua in 90 minutes. The boat departs St. John's each morning at 9:15 and returns at 4 in the afternoon; a round-trip ticket runs about \$75. A quicker option, Winair (866-466-0410; [fly-winair.com](http://fly-winair.com)) offers 15-minute flights twice a day for about \$200 round-trip. When cost is no object, Antigua-based Caribbean Helicopters (268-460-5900; [caribbeanhelicopters.com](http://caribbeanhelicopters.com)), which provides airport transfers for Lighthouse Bay guests, offers charter trips to Barbuda, as well as aerial tours of Antigua and nearby Montserrat. For more information on Barbuda — including its guesthouses — visit the very thorough website, [barbudaful.net](http://barbudaful.net).