



## THIS WEEK'S DESTINATIONS

### 1 BAHAMAS

The crystal-blue waters and white sands don't disappoint

### 2 ENGLAND

Brocket Hall can satisfy your cravings for golf and good food

### 3 CROATIA

The grand old coastal resort of Opatija offers fine dining and stunning scenery

### PLUS BARGAIN BREAKS



Opatija in Croatia



of that, but sadly also encountered mass tourism caused by gigantic cruise ships which came and went every day, and smoke pollution in the nearby harbour.

Like a scattered string of pearls, the islands of the Bahamas stretch alongside Florida for about 500 miles across the Caribbean Sea. Only a small number of the 700 islands are inhabited and Nassau, the capital, is home to around 70 per cent of the 350,000 Bahamians. What used to be a sleepy, quiet town is now the economic, political and

The islands stretch like a string of pearls

infrastructure hub of the nation, and the narrow streets can be crowded at times.

This became most obvious every morning when new towering cruise ships arrived, bringing with them thousands of daytime tourists who spilled onto the streets of downtown Nassau for a quick fix of a new destination.

A popular attraction for shopping is Nassau's Straw Market, which is conveniently located on Bay Street, the main shopping mile. Here locals, mostly women, sell Bahamian straw works, T-shirts, accessories, wood carvings and other souvenirs. In the 1940s the straw vending industry replaced the dying local sponge industry, and today finely crafted items such as baskets, table mats, handbags, hats and dolls are made of dried leaves of palm trees and sisal plants.

Outside the market we were approached by someone who sold coconuts from the back of his car. With much skill and an impressive machete he chopped the coconut, then offered the delicious milk with a straw to my bemused husband, who clearly would have liked to have had a go with the weapon himself.

As if that was not enough for \$5, after the first sip and without asking, a generous slug of gin was added

# Going Bahamas

Leave Nassau behind to find a real island paradise, writes **Wibke Carter**

What struck me first about the Bahamas was how friendly it was. Arriving in Nassau on New Providence island with my husband, we were welcomed by a local band playing folk songs in the airport arrivals hall, followed by the most pleasant taxi journey we have had in a long time.

Chatting with our driver James about everything from the weather forecast ("sunny, no rain") to the best tips for local food ("Frankie's, for the conch fritters") and souvenir

tips ("Straw Market for shopping and rum cake"), the 25-minute transfer into Nassau town passed in the blink of an eye and before we knew it we had arrived at our destination: Graycliff Hotel.

Graycliff Hotel is an icon in Nassau. Originally built in 1740 by famous pirate Captain John Howard Graysmith, it became Nassau's first inn in 1844, before hosting such nobility as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor (formerly King Edward VIII), Lord Mountbatten and Sir Winston Churchill. Graycliff conveys a mysterious, nearly melancholic atmosphere – a house detached

Blue Lagoon Island in the Bahamas, above

from time, a piece of England far away from home.

We too were treated like royalty on check-in, and after being given a tour of the colonial house, the lush gardens and our room above the Humidor Churrascaria restaurant, we were ready for some "island time".

This was our first trip to the Caribbean, and while we did not really know what to expect, we were certainly hoping for vast white beaches, crystal-blue water with tropical sea life and a slower pace of living. During our five-day vacation we were fortunate to experience all

by the friendly salesman to create a rather delicious cocktail – and the sun seemed even hotter for the next hour or so.

The beaches in downtown Nassau are small, crowded and void of the white sand we had dreamed of, so we headed to the Blue Lagoon for a day trip.

After a scenic boat trip through Nassau's historic harbour, we reached the private island which for more than 60 years was owned by the McCutcheon family. John T McCutcheon was the *Chicago Tribune's* political cartoonist and a Pulitzer Prize winner who named the property Treasure Island.

For decades it was known under that name in the Bahamas, until it was sold to LA Meister, the current owner, in 1979.

The white beaches, turquoise waters and swaying palm trees on the island surpassed all my expectations and I enjoyed a day of lying in a double hammock reading while visitors around me snorkelled, kayaked or tried the paddleboats.

There are a few little places to eat or get drinks on Blue Lagoon Island. It is also home to several dolphins and sea lions, but they are held in cages, and although they live in their natural habitat it made me uneasy to see them in captivity.

Another, closer, choice for a day on the beach is Paradise Island, which is connected by (toll) bridge and ferry boats to New Providence island. This is the island of millionaires' villas, beach clubs and the mega-resort Atlantis, around which the beaches are reasonably crowded. But walking a few hundred metres further on is well worth it, as you are rewarded with the relaxing sound of waves hitting the pristine shoreline, and hardly anyone else in sight.

There is plenty of choice for eateries in downtown Nassau, but

following our taxi driver James's advice, we made our way to Frankie's, or Frankie Gone Bananas as the restaurant is properly called. Sitting under the palm roof on the balcony we tried local specialities such as fresh grouper and the famed conch fritters, which were delicious and in texture, I thought, similar to squid rings.

Between 1887 and 1901, the Bahamas were a British colony with Queen Victoria as their ruler. To mark this period in history, a marble statue was erected in Parliament Square on the Queen's birthday, 24 May, 1905. The statue depicts Victoria when she was young, seated on her throne and flanked by cannons.

The Bahamas' colonial past is seen everywhere, from the architecture of the buildings to the red post boxes outside the parliament buildings and Queen

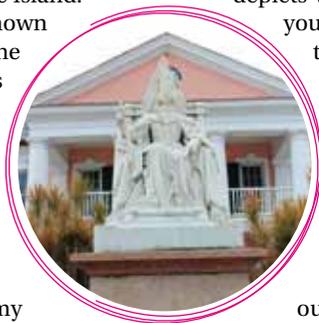
Elizabeth's portrait on the legal tender. Since 1973 the island nation has been part of the Commonwealth, and English remains the national language.

Our Caribbean holiday was over too soon, and when James drove us back to the airport, I glanced at the wide blue ocean for the last time, thinking about the rum cake stowed safely in my luggage. On a cold winter afternoon I will let the sugary, moist delicacy melt in my mouth, I will close my eyes and it will take me back to the white beach, turquoise waters and swaying palm trees of Blue Lagoon Island.

*British Airways* ([www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)) flies daily to Nassau via New York and Miami from £813 including taxes.

*Graycliff Hotel* ([www.graycliff.com](http://www.graycliff.com)) offers 20 individually decorated rooms from £205 per night.

The statue of Queen Victoria in Parliament Square, Nassau, inset; a place to relax on the beach, bottom



# Everything stops for tee

Visitors to Brocket Hall have a choice of 18-hole courses and then there's the lakeside restaurant, writes **Chris Folley**

**T**he name Brocket still inspires fascination and a certain amount of mirth. Charlie Brocket has been out of the limelight for some time now since his jail term and 2004 appearance on *I'm a Celebrity ...* and yet he is still the most immediate reference point for many people when Brocket Hall is mentioned. Staff at his old ancestral pile, now leased out by its trustees, love to joke that bits of his old Ferraris are still kicking about the estate.

All this seems faintly ridiculous when you visit Brocket Hall, 20 minutes north of London, in commuter country between Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City. As you drive through the estate your eyes are soon drawn by the lake and beyond it, up the hill, to the hall itself. This is no Disney-like vanity project of a wealthy eccentric, but an estate steeped in history, the home of two prime ministers, built in 1760 and a retreat for royalty including Queen Victoria and George IV.

Such grandeur can struggle to survive in the modern world, however, so keeping the cash rolling

in these days falls on wedding planners, conference organisers and golf committees. Brocket Hall is now run by Palmerston Hotels & Resorts, while golf membership is thriving – many on my visit were Japanese and Chinese business folk lured in on corporate deals.

Golf was my main reason for visiting, with the chance to play both championship standard courses: the Melbourne, designed by Peter Alliss and Clive Clark and opened in 1992, and the Palmerston. The courses are named after the aforementioned prime ministers, and we were able to play both over a weekend by staying at the 16-room Melbourne Lodge, a short walk from the first tee for the Palmerston course.

Rooms are named after Grand National winners – ours, Mill Reef, with ensuite bathroom, TV and wi-fi – was comfortable, though might need upgrading. Pink wallpaper and Regency-style curtains? Guess it's just not my style.

Breakfast in the Watershyppes bar in the clubhouse, however, was perfect fuel for a golf round – a full English of sizeable proportions and even the option of gluten-free

## BARGAIN BREAKS The best deals

### STAGE SET FOR CITY BREAK

See the hit musical *Made in Dagenham* starring Gemma Arterton and Adrian der Gregorian at the Adelphi Theatre on the Strand in London from £95.50pp including one night's bed and breakfast at the three-star Queen's Park Hotel by Hyde Park. Valid for a 9 January arrival, travel not included. Call 01904 717 359 or see [www.superbreak.co.uk](http://www.superbreak.co.uk)

### MIDWEEK IN THE NEW FOREST

Pride of Britain Hotels is offering a night's stay at the Montagu Arms in

Beaulieu in the heart of the New Forest in Hampshire. The price of £78.50pp (based on two sharing) includes one night's bed and breakfast, gratis tea and coffee, a newspaper and use of the nearby Careys Manor leisure facilities. Valid for midweek stays until 31 March. Call 0800 0893929 or see [www.prideofbritainhotels.com](http://www.prideofbritainhotels.com)

### AMSTERDAM ADVENTURE

Fancy a look at some Dutch art? Courtesy of EasyJet Holidays, stay for two nights at the four-star NH Amsterdam Museum Quarter hotel on a room-only basis for £116pp, including flights from Edinburgh on 27 January. Call 0843 104 1000 or see [www.easyjet.com/holidays](http://www.easyjet.com/holidays)



Clockwise from main: Bocket Hall viewed from the 16th hole of the Melbourne golf course; the Auberge du Lac restaurant; one of the bedrooms at the hotel



toast and rolls for your coeliac correspondent.

The Melbourne course struck me as being more picturesque, its early holes working around the front of the main house and lake. Staff gave wildly varying figures (in their thousands) on how many balls one might find in the water. The 2nd, 4th, 8th and the 18th all flirt with the wet stuff – your finishing hole offers a quite superb view of the main house as you tee off. The Palmerston, meanwhile, much of it set in woodlands and requiring straighter drives to conquer narrow fairways, is considered a greater test.

There is also a golf academy which includes a driving range and a short-game area where you can improve

your game if you enlist the help of one of six professionals on site.

We did this in the afternoon after our first round. The following day my golfing sidekick was rather startled by the fact that I had actually learned how to chip properly after some embarrassingly simple adjustments from head pro Chris Fitt.

If you're blessed with fine weather you might not mind long walks around the estate – there were plenty of ramblers in evidence while we played – but otherwise you can head to the clubhouse bar, complete with Sky Sports on television and a snooker table. My wife probably would not have been amused.

More up her street would have

been our evening's entertainment: a meal at the two-AA Rosette restaurant Auberge du Lac on the other side of the lake from the main hall and clubhouse. It's a beautiful spot, especially if you're outside on the terrace, and clearly popular as a fine-dining treat for locals coming in for the night.

You can get three courses for £60, far more reasonable than à la carte. Veal sirloin cooked in hay with Grelot onions and chargrilled white asparagus was excellent, helped by wine from a long and impressive list.

I was amused by the fact that our sommelier, a Spaniard, couldn't stop enthusing about Hungarian wines rather than the many from his homeland on his wine list. But his

palate was clearly in good working order – the Sauska Cabernet Franc 2009, from the Villány region of Hungary, was magnificent.

A sure sign that we appreciated the feast was finding ourselves the last ones to leave. At least we didn't have to trudge up the hill to our room, as we were able to take the pontoon across the lake.

I imagine this would seem incurably romantic on a moonlit night – maybe the wife will have to come next time after all.

*Brocket Hall, Welwyn, Hertfordshire AL8 7XG has residential golf rates, staying in the Melbourne Lodge, from £129pp B&B with 36 holes of golf, until 31 March, brocket-hall.co.uk*

## 48 HOURS IN Opatija Riviera, Croatia

**FRIDAY, MIDDAY** Check into the Hotel Milenij (double rooms from £65, [www.milenijhoteli.hr](http://www.milenijhoteli.hr)), a pastel pink five-star in the stately old Austro-Hungarian-era Croatian resort of Opatija itself.

**1:30PM** Lunch at the Hotel Milenij. Choose between a snack in the Caffe Wagner, washed down with a slice of the local take on the Viennese Sachertorte chocolate cake, or its fancier Argonauti restaurant.

**3:30PM** Istrian produce is superb, so head for Manufaktura ([www.manufaktura-souvenirs.com](http://www.manufaktura-souvenirs.com)) and try its

range of truffle products and olive oils before you buy.

**8PM** Croatian seafood is world-class and the restaurant at Yacht Club Opatija (tel: 051-272345) offers up boat-fresh shellfish and white fish, washed down with excellent local Malvasija white wine.

**SATURDAY, 9AM** The Lungomare is a waterfront walkway that snakes along the Opatija Riviera. Set off from Opatija in search of quieter Volosko.

**11AM** Recline in a café on the Volosko waterfront and you will realise what first attracted the citizens of Vienna to flock to this corner of the balmy Adriatic.

**1PM** Volosko is something of a gastronomic hub these days, with a flurry

of fine restaurants. Newly refurbished Le Mandrac ([www.lemandrac.com](http://www.lemandrac.com)) spikes up the ultra-fresh local produce with a dash of creativity.

**5PM** Back in Opatija, sweet-toothed visitors have to visit Milenij Choco World (tel: 051-278028). This subterranean hideaway is stuffed full of chocolate in all shapes and sizes and you can watch it being made too.

**8PM** Settle in for stellar dining at Bevanda ([www.bevanda.hr](http://www.bevanda.hr)). Andrej Barbieri's menu features Black Angus tartare with Adriatic oysters to start, followed by mains including

The Hotel Milenij in Opatija, below

Adriatic lobster and John Dory terrine with caviar.

**SUNDAY, 9AM** Spend your last morning enjoying one of the myriad spa treatments at the Wellness Centre in the Hotel Milenij, or join the famous "maiden with the seagull" statue and sit overlooking the calm waters of the Kvarner Gulf.

**ROBIN MCKELVIE**

*The Jet2 ([www.jet2.com](http://www.jet2.com)) service from Edinburgh to Pula (return flights from £118) is the easiest way to get to Opatija, with frequent buses from Pula to Opatija. Croatia tourist office, [www.croatia.hr](http://www.croatia.hr)*

