

CARIBBEAN

ON THE FLY

It's not too late to make that dream vacation an affordable reality this winter. ➔ ALEXANDRA HALL AND MICHAEL BLANDING

PHOTOGRAPH BY DENNIS WELSH/GETTY IMAGES



THE GODS OF CARIBBEAN TRAVEL love to toy with Bostonians. Just when we've had our fill of snowbanks and windburn – when we need a beach getaway more than ever, that is – is also the time when it can be the toughest to get ourselves to that warm idyll. If it isn't prohibitive resort rates deterring you, it's the trip itself. After all, by the time you get to the airport and change planes in Miami or San Juan (with the inevitable lengthy layover), and then drive to the resort, the vacation seems half over.

But here's a ray of sunshine: With a little planning and a few clever booking strategies, you can keep costs and travel time in hand.

1 ➔ THE STRATEGY PICK AN UNDISCOVERED DESTINATION.

Scattered throughout the Caribbean, overshadowed by the better-known destinations, are under-the-radar islands with fewer crowds and lower prices. They're rarely direct flights (a short ride on a puddle jumper is usually involved), but the reward will be pristine shores and great deals.

THE DESTINATION ➔ VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO

Puerto Rico may be packed with visitors throughout the winter, but just off its eastern shore, the minuscule island of Vieques is still relatively unknown to tourists. That means that its white-sand beaches – some of the loveliest in all the

AN ISLAND GEM Splash away the winter blues in the warm waters of Vieques, Puerto Rico.

Caribbean – are uncrowded or, in many cases, completely empty. And that means lower prices at inns and resorts. Hacienda Tamarindo, a small, romantic inn with a gigantic tamarind tree growing up through its middle, has balconies overlooking the beach, rooms decked out with antiques, and an honor bar where patrons can help themselves anytime they please. Ringing in at just under \$200 per night during high season, it's an unbeatable deal for a high-quality stay. Meanwhile, down the road at the trendier W, a more contemporary take on relaxing pervades – by way of infinity pools surrounded by bright, funky lounge chairs, guest rooms filled with modern art, and a gorgeous spa you may just want to move into. And it's also one of the less expensive properties in the W family, with rooms that start from \$269 per night if you book ahead.

No matter where

you stay on the island, the wildlife is a key attraction; tour the mangrove forests, search for sea turtles on the beach, and check out the truly unforgettable bioluminescent bays, in which you can swim with tiny plankton that light up at your touch.

THE DETAILS

Hacienda Tamarindo, Vieques, Puerto Rico, 787-741-8525, haciendatamarindo.com, rates from \$195.
The W, Vieques, 787-741-4100, wvieques.com, rates from \$269. Flights from Boston to San Juan, five hours on JetBlue; flights from San Juan to Vieques, 30 minutes on Cape Air.

2 ➔ THE STRATEGY GO AS A GROUP.

Does the idea of a private tropical home with wraparound porticos and trade-wind breezes appeal? Recruit some friends and rent a villa. Groups of travelers can book a property for much less than the cost of staying at a resort. Bonus: The price often includes cooks and other staff members to make you feel like you're really on vacation.

THE DESTINATION ➔ MERIDA, MEXICO

Merida, full of cultural attractions, is located across the Yucatan Peninsula from

Cancun. Hacienda Petac was once a plantation that produced sisal, a fiber from cactus used for making rope. Now there are luxurious rooms in plantation buildings on the romantic ruined grounds, the former irrigation tank has been transformed into an outdoor pool, and rooms in the main house have become beautiful guest spaces decorated with wooden antiques. Included with the stay are authentic Yucatecan meals served by a gracious team – just try sitting down at the pool without being asked if you want a *cerveza* and guacamole – and alcohol sold at cost. The staff also arranges expeditions to nearby Mayan ruins, visits to a beachside flamingo preserve, and swimming in underground rivers. Best of all is the price: just \$10,500 a week for 10 people – that is, a little more than \$2,000 per couple. Many Caribbean all-inclusives cost four or five times as much.

THE DETAILS

Hacienda Petac, Merida, Mexico, 800-783-6904, haciendapetac.com, starting at \$8,400 per week for one to five people, \$10,500 per week for six to 10. Flights from Boston to Merida, nine hours (one stop) on Continental Airlines; drive from Merida to hacienda, 30 minutes.

WINTER TRAVEL

3 THE STRATEGY
FIND A HOTEL WITH SELF-CATERING APARTMENTS.

Having access to a kitchen can be a huge money-saver for groups – and an even bigger sanity-saver for families. Traveling with tykes requires making life as easy as possible, preferably by staying at a resort complete with plenty of helpful services, a

VIEW TO A VOLCANO
Hotel Chocolat is set on a cocoa plantation near the Pitons, Saint Lucia's twin peaks.

big pool, and a children's center or a slew of planned kids' activities. Alas, with multiple mouths to feed, the cost of restaurant dining at such a place can be a budget-breaking expense.

THE DESTINATION
➔ **THE WESTIN DAWN BEACH RESORT ON ST. MAARTEN**

A cluster of tastefully furnished, spacious apartments, the condos at the Dawn Beach Resort provide kitchens along with full-on ocean views. The residences are only a few minutes' walk

from the rest of the resort, where you'll have access to a multitiered pool perched on a beautiful beach, along with a drop-off kids club, and amenities for mom and dad, like a sprawling spa, casino, and a happening swim-up pool bar.

THE DETAILS
The Westin Dawn Beach Resort, Oyster Pond Road, St. Maarten, Netherland Antilles, 721-543-6700, westinstmaarten.com, four-person condos start at \$795. Flights from Boston to St. Maarten, nine hours (one stop) on American Airlines.

4 THE STRATEGY
FIND A DEAL ON A PACKAGE.

Banish thoughts of flea-ridden hotels or soulless beach resorts – thanks to the economy, even the most upscale hotels and resorts are now offering package deals as an alternative to dropping their base rates. Some throw in an extra night for free; others include meals or excursions. To find them, visit Internet travel sites such as Expedia or Hotels.com – or simply visit the websites of individual resorts in your destination.

THE DESTINATION
➔ **ST. LUCIA**

It's hard to imagine a more romantic getaway than St. Lucia, a lush volcanic island best known for its star attraction: the twin emerald-green peaks known as the Pitons. (If you need more validation, the reality show *The Bachelor* has filmed there not once, but twice.) Located at the foot of those mountains, Jalousie Plantation is offering spa packages that include a treatment, daily breakfasts, and a free fourth night.

Nearby, a famed chocolate maker has

just opened a property, **Hotel Chocolat, The Hotel**, fittingly located on the grounds of a cocoa plantation. Packages include not only all meals, but also a "tree-to-bar" tour, where guests do everything from harvesting cacao pods to making (and presumably eating) their own chocolate bars – and then can work it off with a guided hike up the 800-foot-high Gros Piton.

THE DETAILS
Jalousie Plantation, Soufriere, St. Lucia, 758-456-8000, jalousieplantation.com, rates from \$303, four-night spa package \$2,700; **Hotel Chocolat, The Hotel**, Soufriere, 800-757-7132, hotelchocolat.com, rates from \$550, three-night packages from \$2,400. Flights from Boston to St. Lucia, eight hours (one stop) on JetBlue.

5 THE STRATEGY
GO CAMPING IN THE CARIBBEAN.

The Caribbean doesn't naturally lend itself to the idea of "roughing it" – after all, when people say "Life's a Beach," they usually don't think about pitching a tent on one. But it's actually the perfect place for sleeping outdoors, with

ROUGHING IT? Maho Bay Camps rents tent-cottages near a private beach on St. John, US Virgin Islands.

warm temperatures and soft breezes, not to mention the ability to save big money. Island campgrounds range from tent platforms on the beach to screened-in cottages overlooking the surf.

THE DESTINATION
➔ **ST. JOHN**

Nearly half of the island of St. John is national parkland, making it greener and quieter than its rowdier neighbor in the US Virgin Islands, St. Thomas. Within the national park boundary, **Maho Bay Camps** is more of a tent city than a campground; wood-framed cottages with fabric sides have both electricity and propane stoves. Activities at a nearby private beach include sailing and other watersports and yoga classes. Across the island, the camp's sister property, Concordia Eco-Resort, offers multilevel treehouses with views of azure waters and efficiency cottages that can fit up to four people at bargain rates and are so plush they barely feel like camping.

THE DETAILS
Maho Bay Camps, St. John, US Virgin Islands, 800-392-9004, maho.org, rates from \$140; **Concordia Eco-Resort**, 800-392-9004, concordiaeco-resort.com, from \$160. Flight to St. Thomas, seven hours (one stop); ferry to St. John, about 20 minutes.



Caribbean

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opened recently, spot-lighting villas with full kitchens. But guests are encouraged to leave the resort – for nature adventures like whale watching (humpback whales migrate to the area’s shore every winter), cave tours, and hikes to El Limon Falls. At less than \$400 per night for a four-person villa, its value is pretty hard to resist. On the more rustic (but no less charming) end, there’s Eva Luna. It cossets guests in rooms washed in soothing colors with terraces, and a downright lovely pool is steps from the town’s main

ON THE QUIET SIDE Stay in a villa at Balcones del Atlantico, on the Dominican Republic’s northeast coast.



PHOTOGRAPH FROM ROCK RESORTS INTERNATIONAL

beach. The average final tally? Around \$100 per night – which means you get a vacation from high credit card bills *and* from the cold.

THE DETAILS

Balcones del Atlantico, Las Terrenas, Samana, Dominican Republic, 866-617-7625, balconesdelatlantico.rockresorts.com, two-bedroom villas from \$399 a night; **Eva Luna**, Las Terrenas, Samana, 809-978-5611, villa-evaluna.com, from \$100 a night. Flights from Boston to Santo Domingo, about five hours (non-stop) on JetBlue. ■

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THE GLOBE PUZZLE > UNCOMMON SENSES By Emily Cox and Henry Rathvon

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SUDOKU > By Pappocom

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