

# Truly tropical



With a heritage dating back 3,000 years, Caribbean style draws on a melting pot of cultures, religions and influences across its many islands says **Rowena Carr-Allinson**

**C**andy-coloured buildings with louvered shutters, archways, wooden balconies and interior courtyards remind us of the Caribbean's fraught history. For despite the European presence, the Caribbean has retained its colourful and exotic touch.

The dazzling white beaches, lush green rainforests, turquoise seas, grapefruit and mango of the region are picked up in the tangerine, lime, bold blue, pink and whitewashed walls. The architecture and design from different continents are adapted to a tropical lifestyle.

The islands and their opportunities have attracted interest from a new generation of designers. Mary Fox Linton and Myron Goldfinger follow in the footsteps of British designer Oliver Messel, who left his mark on Mustique and Barbados in the 1950s.

Today, Fox Linton and Goldfinger add a touch of glamour and contemporary style to a new type of resort and residential home. While Fox Linton is credited with the lavish interiors at

Carlisle Bay in Antigua, Goldfinger has changed the face of Anguilla. A fellow of the American Institute of Architects, he has received numerous awards for architectural design excellence and has created a post-modern landmark at Altamer with an audacious complex of geometrical shapes.

Today, Caribbean style is all about understated colonial elegance and traditional rustic simplicity.

While some resorts stay meticulously faithful to their indigenous roots with straightforward rattan furniture and stone walls, others hark back to the colonial era with flamboyant grandeur. Beyond that, newcomers are setting new standards with cutting edge luxury.

Caribbean residential architecture, however, is a mix of colonial two-storey homes, grand townhouses and chattel cottages. Homes were built to withstand extreme weather conditions, from intense humid heat to hurricanes — particularly pertinent with the recent hurricanes.

Bricks, originally imported as ballast, or sturdy coral and limestone were ideal

building materials. The pink tint can be traced back to plaster mix made from crushed coral stone and seashells.

Blending aesthetics with the practical was a challenge. Homes needed cover from harsh winds, shelter from the rain and shade from the sun. The Spaniards were most at ease. Verandas, balconies, shutters, patios, upper galleries, double arcades and indoor courtyards, as well as wrought iron doors, were all used to increase ventilation.

The wooden chattel houses, created in Barbados post-emancipation as 'mobile homes', are the staple Caribbean home. The colourful cottages still sit elevated on concrete blocks today, ready to up and go and let rainwater run under.

As for furniture, initially all four poster beds, rocking chairs and settees were imported from Europe, but the soft woods didn't last and soon local artisans were creating copies using local hardwoods better suited to the weather, humidity and termites. Craftsmen were soon adding personal touches like carved palm fronds, fruits and leaves.

design caribbean



## ISLAND STYLE

Lush and tropical, the paradise islands of the Caribbean were a bounty of wealth for Europeans in search of new territories and resources. By the early 16th century the Spanish conquistadors had annihilated the local Amerindians and the fight for colonisation had begun in earnest.

The European heritage is obvious. The contrast between islands and their unique personalities is striking. Some features, especially Hispanic, may have spread throughout, but each island has kept its individuality and coloniser's touch.

The English victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 started a 300-year struggle for colonisation between the major players in Europe: Spain, England, France, Holland and Denmark. With the explosion of trade — first with tobacco, then cotton and finally the 'white gold', sugar cane — plantation houses and lifestyles were built to match the European standards. At the same time, 15 million slaves were shipped in from Africa.

## Spanish Caribbean

**Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico**  
The Spanish used the Caribbean as a gateway to their empire. Riddled with forts and churches, even cathedrals, San Juan and Havana were carefully planned cities. The Spanish style is distinctive in the West Indies and has spread throughout. Colonial



Light relief: white (here and above left) reflects the colour of the magnificent beaches that ring the Caribbean islands

baroque buildings feature archways, carved ceilings, verandas, jalousies, bright stucco walls, shuttered doorways and balconies.

Buildings mirrored the architecture of the Spanish Mudejar, popular in Seville and Andalusia. Tiled floors, intricate wood carvings and wrought iron grills, as well as open courtyards with fountains and mahogany beams throughout, are a direct legacy of the Moors.

Unlike other Europeans, the Spanish sugar aristocrats, or *sacarocracia*, built their opulent homes in town, not in their *ingenios* (sugar plantations). Today in Cuba, the towns remain untouched, but most plantation homes were destroyed during the war of independence or during Castro's

reorganisation of the agricultural system. The best place to witness Spanish style is at the unscathed Aldama Palace in Havana. The entire town retains its baroque and rococo style highlighted by tall pillars, internal patios and shaded arcades and galleries.

## French flavour

**Guadeloupe, Haiti, Marie Galante, Martinique, St Barts, St Martin**

The French *dom-toms* (overseas territories) are still an integral part of France today. Martinique, Saint Domingue (now Haiti) and Guadeloupe have a Creole heritage, but are definitely Gallic, while St Pierre in Martinique is still referred to as 'the Paris of the Antilles'. The distinctive houses, built with local



Bright outlook: colour is key to Caribbean design, here in a hotel room or in the kitchen of a Caribbean home (below left)



materials — corals, volcanic pumice stone or brick — are covered by hipped fish-scale cast iron roofs that have turned rusty red.

Plantation homes adopted verandas, balconies and louvred windows, but weren't as grand as on other islands. Today, tiny but glamorous St Barts is a tropical version of St Tropez, with only a few brightly coloured chattel houses and exotic plants betraying its Caribbean location.

### British Tropics

Anguilla, Antigua, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Jamaica, Nevis, St Kitts Although the earliest British settlements started around 1624, the lavish homes associated with colonial style didn't appear until the latter half of the 17th century.

Barbados has many Georgian townhouses, while Jamaica has one of the most glamorous mansion houses in the West Indies — The Rose Hall. Both islands blend classic Georgian and practical features.

Antigua, too, still bears many landmarks from the era, including the world's only

Georgian dockyard: Nelson's Dockyard. In contrast, Anguilla and the British Virgin Islands bear no significant reminders of British colonisation, aside from red pillar post boxes, the language and driving on the left. Unspoilt and remote, both are still wild and relatively untamed.

### The Netherlands

Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao

There is a hint of Holland all over the Caribbean thanks to the use of their mills to crush sugar cane. Better at trading than their colonial competitors, the Dutch made Curacao into a commercial centre for trading sugar, slaves and contraband.

The architecture on the island is unquestionably Dutch, with its detailed brickwork, rounded gables and decorative red-tiled roofs. Inspired by the 17th-century townhouses in Amsterdam, these Caribbean versions did little to combat the heat.

Both the plantation houses (*landhuizen*) and the slave shacks of clay and thatch (*kunuku*) are still visible today.



### DESIGNER CLASSICS

It's hard to do justice to the extreme mix of styles in the Caribbean. Four key styles are Modern, 'Fusion', Dutch and traditional Caribbean.

### Altamer Villas, Anguilla

The post-modern villas created by Myron Goldfinger in Anguilla are awe-inspiring. Sharp angles and curves merge in whitewashed structures facing the horizon on West Shoal Bay.

The 12,000sq ft villas, filled with vivid colours and oversized furnishings, wouldn't look out of place in Los Angeles or Miami. Jane Goldfinger, the interior designer, has used Russian and Brazilian themes to create an opulent exoticism.

### Carlisle Bay, Antigua

Combining the hip and the elegant with laid-back cool, Carlisle Bay has achieved luxury without arrogance. The interiors by Mary Fox Linton give off a sober yet sumptuous feel. Wide open spaces are filled with dark wood and wicker furniture, covered in miles of cool white fabrics and silk cushions in subtle lavenders and greens.

It's a successful blend of styles, including Caribbean, European and Indonesian, that strikes a balance between the eye-catching and the comfortable. The modern library, surreal slick spa and screening room with 45 blue leather seats also give it the James Bond edge.

### British Virgin Islands

The British Virgin Islands, unlike Antigua and Jamaica, have few historical landmarks aside from sunken wrecks and keep a genuine Caribbean flavour.

While Antigua's Jumby Bay, for example, harks back to the grand colonial era with mahogany four posters, a hacienda-style 'estate house' with wooden ceiling fans and manicured lawns, the BVI remain rustic.



Looking back: traditional design can be witnessed in Caribbean homes and in resorts (above left) across the region

Virgin Gorda's Biras Creek resort shies away from the traditional take on luxury to keep it cosy and simple. Individual cottages along Berchers Bay offer sea views, private verandas and al fresco showers and all creature comforts without attitude.

### Willemstad

The rainbow-gabled facades of Curacao are world-famous. Willemstad's splendid 17th- and 18th-century Dutch colonial buildings are a legacy to the world and are now listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site — along with the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal among others.

Willemstad's historic quarters of Punda and Otrabanda have kept their colourful Caribbean tones and are home to some of the must-see sights — such as the Penha house, a bold yellow three-storey house that shows typical Iberian influences on Dutch architecture. In wedding cake style, the rococo building features heavily decorated curves and gables and stands out against the tropical background.

### What next?

**MID-RANGE:** Virgin Holidays offers packages to Anguilla's Cap Juluca. Prices start from £1,559 per person for seven nights, including continental breakfast, tennis and water sports. Tel: 0870 220 2788. [www.virginholidays.co.uk](http://www.virginholidays.co.uk)

**LUXURY:** Caribtours offers packages to Carlisle Bay in Antigua from £2,257 per person, from January 2005. The price includes seven nights' accommodation, midweek flights, private transfers and daily breakfast. Tel: 020 7751 0660. [www.caribtours.co.uk](http://www.caribtours.co.uk)

**LUXURY:** Complete Caribbean has seven nights at Biras Creek in the British Virgin Islands from £2,127 per person from January 2005. The price includes accommodation in a Garden Suite on full-board, private transfers and scheduled return flights from Gatwick. Tel: 01423 531031. [www.completecaribbean.co.uk](http://www.completecaribbean.co.uk)