Travel International

Bask in Bajan beauty at the Crane Resort

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Guest rooms facing the sea look over pools and the original carriage house at the Crane Resort in Barbados. (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun)

It's hard not to be impressed with the view.

Gazing out from my veranda at the Crane Resort in Barbados, watching the waves roll in and the palm trees sway in the easterly trade winds, I can almost convince myself I see Africa.

This vista has been drawing guests to this cliff-top oasis on the southeast coast of the island for more than a century.

Watching the sun rise from a room at the Crane Resort in Barbados as the waves roll in from Africa. (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun) (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun)

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However, when the Marine Villa mansion opened as the Crane Beach Hotel in 1887, there were only 18 rooms.

Today, thanks to the vision of Toronto entrepreneur Paul Doyle, who bought the hotel and 16 hectares of surrounding land in 1988, the Crane is an expanding luxury residential resort.

Doyle says he was lured by the history and natural landscape of the property, which overlooks the glorious Crane Beach — named best Caribbean beach by USA Today in 2015.

He wasn't the only one. Among the historic hotel's elite guests was Buffalo Bill Cody, who famously left his gold chain and fob watch as payment for his room.

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And the hotel was also popular with locals.

Toronto native Paul Doyle, managing director of the Crane, speaks outside the original 1887 building in Barbados. (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun)

"The hotel was very important in the cultural life of Barbados — it was the place to come for big fetes, old year's night, weddings, honeymoons," Doyle says. "Countless people — but it's not just them who have memories, but their parents and grandparents also have memories of coming here."

He says that this rich cultural history was important in the design of the expansion of the Crane, billed as the oldest continuously operating resort in the Caribbean.

"The last thing this place needed was a big modern glass tower that had nothing to do with the history," Doyle says. "We tried to be respectful of its place in the history of Barbados, so as we designed, we tried to incorporate almost everything."

He says the challenge to the architects was to create a village as if it had existed in 1887 while being tastefully renovated for today's use. I can attest they succeeded. Wandering the pedestrian walkways feels like a step back in time. The shops, restaurants — including Zen, a Zagat-rated top eatery — and bar, aptly named 'Bar 1887,' all have a historic colonial look with their decorative trim and wooden shutters. There's even a building marked 'Town Hall.'

The colonial look of the buildings in the Crane Resort village. (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun)

Despite the old-world appearance, these charming buildings don't hail from the 19th century. The first new building to join the original villa and its 1887 expansion was only opened in December 2000.

"That was the intent, to make it look like it was already here," says Doyle. "We went around the country and took photos of iconic architectural details that were then incorporated into the design of the residential buildings and the common facilities."

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The decor of the rooms is also kept faithful to the original 18-room property. The timber tray ceilings, coral stone walls, four-poster beds and antique reproduction furniture provide a timeless elegance.

The step back in time amid luxurious amenities is capped with two pieces of artwork in each unit, reproductions of watercolours made by a woman who was a guest in 1888. In one, there's a couple sitting on a bench, her with a parasol, him with a bowler hat, looking out to sea. You can find that bench still facing the sea today.

Waves wash up on the famous Crane Beach under the watch of the Crane Resort in Barbados (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun)

The Crane describes the southeast coast as representing "the authentic Barbados, largely untouched by the passage of time" and the "antithesis of the island's 'Platinum' west coast."

"People would have come here to get away, because they wanted peace and quiet," Doyle says. "There are some people who come to an island and they want night life and action all the time, and there are other people who want to bring a book and read and relax and then maybe go out somewhere for some night life. But they come back and wake up here."

Though the Crane considers itself a hideaway from the bustle of Barbados' capital and largest city, Bridgetown, guests aren't isolated from each other, he adds.

"What I think sets us apart from other people in the region, not just Barbados, is the emphasis on community and community amenities — like restaurants and the fitness centre, spa, tennis courts — it's getting together."

The colour blue pops at the Crane Resort on the southeast coast of Barbados. (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun)

Doyle attributes spending his summer months at his home in the Summerhill area of Toronto as the root behind his desire to provide a sense of community and amenities that focus on lifestyle

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"I think in our business, we typically focus on the room, but I think that's secondary," Doyle says. "The important thing, I think, is the sense of community."

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Being situated on the eastern coast of the eastern-most island in the Caribbean does have its challenges. "It's like being on a boat here sometimes," Doyle says of the salt air rusting metal, even stainless steel.

But that air is also believed to provide health benefits. The hotel has long been known as kind of a health spa because of the air, which "doesn't come over land, this is coming over thousands of miles of ocean and it's very fresh and cool and healthy," he says.

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The Crane Resort is not alone along the east coast of Barbados. We took a drive along the Atlantic coastline and watched surfers at Bathsheba, the 'soup bowl,' with its magnificent rock formations, and dined at Atlantis Hotel, famous locally for its buffets on Wednesdays and Sundays.

The great house at St. Nicholas Abbey is one of only three remaining Jacobean mansions in the Western Hemisphere. (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun)

We then ascended Cherry Tree Hill, lined with swaying sugar cane, until we reached about 850 feet above sea level and stopped to take in the breathtaking view of the Scotland District, which encompasses the parish of St. Andrew. It's here where the mahogany trees planted in the mid-18th century begin and guide you to St. Nicholas Abbey. Built in 1658, it is one of the oldest surviving plantations on the island. You can take a tour of the great house — one of only three remaining Jacobean mansions in the Western Hemisphere — and gardens, and sample their rum.

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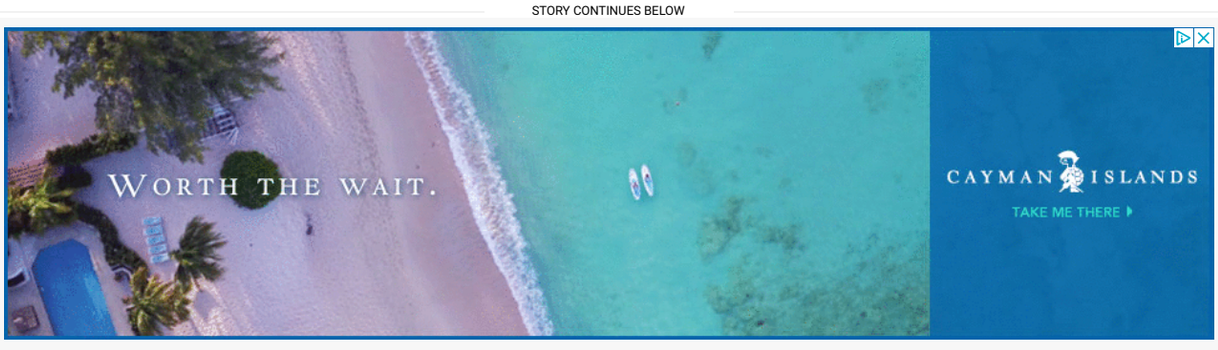

IF YOU GO

— The Crane provides shuttle service to shopping in Bridgetown and also to the famous Oistins Fish Fry on Friday nights.

A hearty fish and macaroni dish to split at the famous Oistins Fish Fry. (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun)

— L'Azure Restaurant hosts an amazing daily buffet — but you don't want to miss Sunday, when a local gospel choir performs while you eat.

— Being perched on a cliff, the resort has built an elevator to the Crane Beach

— Guests are greeted by an enormous bearded fig tree in the roundabout outside the lobby, which is fitting as Barbados is believed to have been named after that tree.

The enormous bearded fig tree in the roundabout in front of the lobby of the Crane Resort in Barbados. (Cynthia McLeod/Toronto Sun)

— It is against the law to wear camouflage clothing in Barbados and to carry items made of camouflage material.

— Find out more about the Crane Resort at thecrane.com.

FUN FACT

The area isn't named for the bird. It once was the site of a small commercial port that included a crane to lower and raise cargo.

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