

# CARIBBEAN LIFE

Barbados' St. Nicholas Abbey, built around 1650, is said to be haunted by the ghost of its first occupant, Benjamin Berringer.



ISLAND STYLE

## BLUEPRINTS IN THE SAND

European architecture meets Caribbean craftsmanship in the islands' grandest homes, proud remnants of the region's tumultuous colonial period.

TOURING JAMAICA'S MAGNIFICENT Rose Hall Great House — whose limestone front steps lead to an interior that showcases a classically proportioned ballroom, a sweeping staircase of hand-carved mahogany and five bedrooms

decorated with fine antique furniture — visitors are transported back in time to an era when sugar cane was king and vast fortunes were amassed from sprawling plantations of “green gold.” One can't help but be awestruck by »

ZACH STOVALL



Left: Guests at Martinique's Habitation Clément tour this classic home and sample the house Rhum. Right: The Whim Plantation on St. Croix offers visitors an enchanting glimpse into Caribbean life during the 18th century.

this three-story cut-stone and stucco mansion that presides from a hilltop over a wind-swept estate. It was built in the late 1700s for the then-princely sum of 30,000 British pounds, every brick laid by slaves laboring under unimaginable conditions.

In his new book, *Caribbean Houses: History, Style, and Architecture* (Rizzoli New York; \$60), West Indian furniture expert Michael Connors delves into the architecture and design of this and other historically significant buildings constructed during the region's



450-year colonial era, when settlers from Spain, the Netherlands, France, Denmark and Britain brought their native architectural sensibilities to the Caribbean, creating a unique design vernacular appropriate for a tropical climate. Ostentatious emblems of the plantocracy's burgeoning affluence and influence, these dwellings celebrate form as much as function.

Although many of the region's stately structures have long since crumbled to the ground, a significant few have survived — not necessarily

because of any deliberate conservation effort, but thanks to what Connors has dubbed “preservation by neglect.” Having withstood hurricanes, earthquakes, slave uprisings and modern land development, these buildings, which incorporate European architectural motifs, locally available materials and indigenous styles of workmanship, reveal the Caribbean's storied past through their distinctive features and timeless appeal. See for yourself at the following sites, each an enduring testament to a Caribbean era long past.

#### ST. NICHOLAS ABBEY, BARBADOS

Constructed in the 1650s and believed to be the oldest building on the island, St. Nicholas Abbey is one of only three remaining Jacobean-style residences in the Americas. Elegant curvilinear galleries, an arcaded Georgian portico and a trio of gables topped by ball finials distinguish the three-story structure, whose English manor house design

is typical of the British settlers, who constructed island homes that were almost exact replicas of the ones they left behind, down to the chimneys and the fireplaces. The interior, which has been painstakingly restored by the current owners, features ornate moldings, handsome cedar paneling, period furniture and working fireplaces. Don't leave without buying some sugar or molasses, manufactured on-site, or without sampling a tot of St. Nicholas' boutique rum, hand-distilled on property. *The Abbey opens Sunday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Admission is \$15 for adults, \$10 for children. 246-422-5357; stnicholasabbey.com*

#### THE PENHA BUILDING, CURAÇAO

Possibly the island's most photographed structure, the Penha Building is the pride of the pastel-colored Punda district in Curaçao's capital (and UNESCO World Heritage Site), Willemstad. The iconic harborfront home was built in 1708 for the mother-in-law of the then governor, and in typical Dutch colonial-style, its original design was almost a carbon copy of an Amsterdam town house. In the early 1800s, the building was bought by merchants J. L. Penha & Sons, who walled in the original galleries, added the distinctive exterior stucco ornamentation and converted the lower floor into a store. “It's definitely the finest example of Curaçao's baroque architecture,” says Connors. Inside, few original features remain, but visitors can soothe any disappointment with a purchase from what is now the island's oldest duty-free purveyor. *The store at Heerenstraat 1 opens Monday through Saturday from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., and from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Sundays. 599-9-461-2266*

**GOOD HOPE, JAMAICA** An hour's drive from Montego Bay and near the north-coast town of Falmouth, the great house on Good Hope plantation was built in 1755 in typical Caribbean Georgian style. The Palladian entrance, characterized by an impressive double stairway, leads to a faithfully restored

interior that is airy and light-filled, thanks to warm-weather modifications of the Georgian design, including high ceilings, louvered windows and ever-open “doorways,” which have no doors to hinder cross-ventilation. The wife of Good Hope's original owner was buried under the house; her tomb still rests in the basement. While the house isn't open to the public, the undeterred can book a stay at the antique-filled hilltop guesthouse, set on a vast and picturesque working farm. 876-469-3444; [goodhopejamaica.com](http://goodhopejamaica.com)

#### ROSE HALL GREAT HOUSE, JAMAICA

The legend surrounding this iconic 18th-century hilltop house, which Connors considers possibly the grandest English home in the Caribbean, continues to captivate visitors. The home's former owner, Annie Palmer, known as the White Witch of Rose Hall, is said to have used black magic to murder three husbands and make a succession of

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The daffodil-colored Penha building cuts an iconic figure along Willemstad's quaint harbor in Curaçao. Right: Fine period furnishings grace St. Nicholas Abbey.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: TED DAVIS, JEN JUDGE, ZACH STOVALL (2)



# CARIBBEAN LIFE

slaves her lovers. Palmer was eventually strangled by one of her slaves, and her ghost reportedly roams the halls of the ocean-view residence that was later all but destroyed in a slave rebellion. Built in the style of an English manor home (minus the chimneys), Rose Hall has since undergone a multimillion-dollar restoration to replicate its original furniture and interiors, which are embellished with ornate mahogany moldings and silk-covered walls. *Guided tours are \$20 for adults (\$10 for children), run 45 minutes and are offered Monday through Sunday from 9:15 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. 888-767-3425; rosehall.com*

## HABITATION CLÉMENT, MARTINIQUE

What makes this French West Indian *maison de maître* so important, says Connors, is that the structure remains largely the same as it was in the 17th century, when it was built, probably because it remained in the hands of descendants of the original owner until

1986. The two-story wood and stone house is surrounded on three sides by enclosed galleries typical of the French Colonial style and which shelter the open interior rooms from sun and rain, provide protected access between them and also served as entertaining spaces. Visitors can stroll through the great house, filled with original furniture, and tour the grounds, including original sugar works and antique distillery. A stop into the tasting room is a highlight; the house brand Rhum Clément is one of rum-proud Martinique's finest labels. The lush national heritage site is one of the island's oldest plantations and was the location of the historic 1991 discussion of the Mideast peace process between French president François Mitterrand and President George H. W. Bush. *The estate opens from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily and is closed during the month of September. 011-596-54-62-07; martinicaonline.it/english/habitation\_clement\_en.htm*

## WHIM PLANTATION, ST. CROIX

Although the house at Whim Plantation was built late in the 18th century, its distinctive oval-ended design is more reminiscent of a French château than typical Danish colonial homes, which were designed in a modified neo-classical style. Encircled by a dry gully designed to direct cooling breezes to the basement, the relatively small coral and limestone house has only three rooms (the kitchen and bathhouse are detached), with three-foot-thick walls, 16-foot ceilings and large doorless entryways that keep the interior cool. Whim is the oldest plantation in the Virgin Islands, and visitors can tour its 12 acres, which include the restored house, a sugar mill and out buildings. *The plantation is open Monday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Guided great house tours last about an hour and cost \$10 for adults, \$4 for children. 340-772-0598; stcroixlandmarks.com*

— Sarah Greaves-Gabbadon

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