

New ports of call adding spice to Caribbean cruises

Travellers can now trek to Grand Turk and say bonjour to Bonaire

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Note: This article has been edited to correct a previously published version.

The Caribbean is already a powerful magnet for cruise travellers. But cruise lines are adding new ports to their itineraries and adding new ports to punch up their lineups.

New ports include the Turks and Caicos, where you can check out world-renowned diving, as well as Bonaire and Tortola.

New ships launching this November include Princess Cruises' Ruby, Celebrity Cruise's Solstice and Carnival's Splendour.

Here's a look at some of the new offerings.

TURKS AND CAICOS: The \$60-million Grand Turk Cruise Centre, created by Carnival Cruise Lines, opened in 2006 and continues to expand. The 5.2-hectare facility has both a private beach and supersized pool.

Dining includes the newest outpost of Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville restaurant, plus a coffee bar and ice cream parlour. Shoppers enjoy the 3,000-square-metre duty free store.

You can also rent a car, jeep or bike to explore the island of Grand Turk which is 11 kilometres long and two kilometres wide. In addition to magnificent beaches, it is world renowned for diving, snorkelling, fishing and other water sports.

New tours include a hop-on/hop-off island tour bus that has a stop at a restored 1800s prison and historic lighthouse.

Many tours take advantage of Grand Turk's marine environment, including a semi-sub tour, snorkelling, kayaking, fly-fishing, power snorkelling and helmet diving.

Soft adventure tours include beach horseback riding, stingray encounter at Gibb's Cay and four-wheel drive and dune buggy tours.

BONAIRE: Bonaire is another new port of call for cruise ships. A range of excursions focus on the island's famous first-class snorkelling and diving. Many Caribbean islands brag about their underwater worlds, but Bonaire is considered one of the elite.

The island led the way by protecting sea turtles back in 1961, banning spearfishing in 1971, making it illegal to remove live coral in 1975 and establishing the first marine park in 1979. It also helps that the island is outside the traditional hurricane zone and is a desert island with no river runoff into the sea.

This dry climate and cacti plants are why Bonaire is called Arizona by the Sea. Unlike its better-known neighbours, Aruba and Curacao, this isle of 14,000 residents is quiet and laid-back. See colourful butterflies at the Bonaire Butterfly Farm. Or take a kayak through the calm waters of Lac Bay National Park and its fabulous mangroves.

TORTOLA: Tortola is a superb destination for water sports, snorkelling and diving. There are several underwater wrecks including the popular RMS Rhone.

The warm trade winds also make this island a sailor's paradise. Day trips include visiting Jost Van Dyke, a favourite island for yachters and home of White Bay and the Soggy Dollar Bar. Another neighbouring isle, Virgin Gorda, is the place to explore the caves, grottos and pools of the famous Baths, formed by gigantic boulders.

Even if you don't snorkel or scuba, you can see the underwater world of coral reefs and shipwrecks from the camera of a remote-operated vehicle (ROV). You'll view what the robot sees on a large plasma screen.

Starting Nov. 15, Carnival's 3,006-passenger Splendour begins eastern Caribbean's sailings including Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, Dominican Republic, Grand Turk and Nassau until February. Visit carnival.com or call 888-CARNIVAL.

Celebrity's 2,850-passenger Solstice begins its maiden season Nov. 23 with seven-night eastern Caribbean cruises calling on Puerto Rico, St. Maarten, St. Kitts and Tortola until May. Visit celebritycruises.com or call 800-437-3111.

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ANDY NEWMAN PHOTO

Carnival Cruises begins sailing to Grand Turk later this month as part of a package that also includes Nassau, the D.R., St. Thomas and Puerto Rico. (Nov. 1, 2008)