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WHAT'S NEW |

Island Hoppers, Pack Your Passports

By GARY LEE
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Hot to explore the next big thing in the Caribbean? During the past year, a beach bag full of new lodging, flights and other attractions has popped up across the region.

The most significant development has been the new regulations requiring that all non-nationals entering Caribbean countries, Bermuda and the Bahamas by air have a passport. The rules, which went into effect Jan. 23, have sent many Americans scurrying to apply for passports; similar requirements for visitors arriving by land or sea will be phased in by Jan. 1.

Not surprisingly, travel to Puerto Rico — which U.S. citizens can enter without a passport — has increased sharply, according to tourism officials. It's too early to tell the exact levels visits have risen islandwide, but the Sheraton Old San Juan has reported a 30 percent uptick in occupancy during January. At San Juan's Westin Rio Mar Beach Golf Resort & Spa, bookings were up 17 percent in January. Other properties have cited similar figures.

"With all the passport confusion, people are going with what's comfortable," said Drew Toth, the Westin's director of marketing.

Flight and hotel bookings in the U.S. Virgin Islands, also accessible without a passport, have shot "way up," according to Henry de Lagarde, director of tourism for North America for the U.S. Virgin Islands. "Some visitors have told us they chose the Virgin Islands specifically because they didn't have to deal with the passport hassles," he said.

Islands where passports are required are fighting to attract customers. For instance, tourism officials in the Bahamas will reimburse U.S. travelers the cost of their passports: \$97 for adults and \$82 for children. (Restrictions apply; see the Web site for Bahamas tourism, www.bahamas.com for details.)

Not to be outdone, several resorts in Jamaica are also offering travelers discounts on meals and other attractions up to the price of their passports. For info, check out www.visitjamaica.com.



RADISSON ARUBA RESORT & CASINO

New on Aruba: the Larimar Spa at the Radisson Aruba Resort & Casino, which features an aloe vera and rum massage.

Hotels

The accent in new hotels is on luxury: honeymoon-worthy haunts with up-to-the-minute amenities and views that bring you close to fainting. Here's a sampling of what's new; rates quoted are per night, double occupancy, and for low season, which usually starts after Easter.

■ **Antigua.** Hermitage Bay (268-562-5500, www.hermitagebay.com) has 25 ocean-view cottages, all decked out with iPod dock stations, flat-screen TVs and hardwood floors. From \$570.

■ **St. Maarten.** The 317-room Westin St. Maarten Dawn Beach Resort & Spa (800-228-3000, www.westin.com) has a full-service spa and casino, and its Opal Ultra Lounge is an edgy nightspot. Introductory rates of \$302 available until April 16 for stays of four nights or more.

■ **Turks and Caicos.** The Somerset on Grace Bay (649-946-5900, www.thesomerset.com) has 53 suites, lawn croquet and such neat touches as swimming pools equipped with underwater stereo music. From \$450.