Surf and Surf: A Look at Six of the Cruise Lines’ Private Oases

In 1977, Norwegian Cruise Line purchased the majority of the Bahamas’ Great Stirrup Cay from an oil company and turned the former military outpost into an oasis for its passengers. Since then, other cruise lines have followed suit, either leasing or buying entire islands (or pieces thereof). And just as the race has been on to see who can build the most amenity-laden ship, the cruise lines’ ocean-edged retreats have received their share of enhancements, including aqua parks, horseback riding and even Barbie Escalades.

As a result, these patches of white sand and barbecue buffets have become favorites of ship passengers, because they give guests a taste of untrammeled island life — well, less trammeled than sharing a port of call with three or four other bollards of people.

Here’s a look at six of the cruise lines’ private Caribbean oases, including what they offer, where they are and what you can do when you get there. Plus, we suggest a few tips to make your stay on the islands a little more pleasant. You’ll have to grab that hammock in the shade yourself.

Note: While all offer the ability to charge float rentals and libations to your stateroom card, bring cash along for shopping in the markets. Or don’t. Who says you have to shop everywhere you go?

— Christine Koubek

CASTAWAY CAY

WHO GOES THERE: Disney Cruise Line
WHERE: This 1,000-acre island is part of the Abaco chain in the Bahamas, about 60 miles north of Nassau.
GETTING THERE: Disney Magic and Wonder make regular stops. Best part: Ships dock at the island, so you can walk on and off at will.
PLAYING: The expansive horse-shaped family beach is home to a rental shop (rafts, snorkeling gear, water cycles and the like) plus a water-based jungle gym complete with zip lines. The adults-only Serenity Bay is the place to have a massage in an open-air cabana overlooking the sea. Bike along paved (and sandy) trails to a tranquil overlook, or paddle out to the 175-foot Flying Dutchman, featured in "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest." Kids can dig for (faua) whalebones and build and race rafts at Scuttle’s Cove.
EATING: Two open-air buffet lunches are offered. Castaway Air Bar offers grilled steaks, fish, chicken, salads and island libations. Burgers, hot dogs, cookies the size of CDs and other family fare are available at Cookie’s BBQ, a pavilion near the main beach.
SHOPPING: Bay Castaway Cay paraphernalia in the The Sells Sea Shells boutique, or send a postcard from the island’s post office.

GREAT STIRRUP CAY

WHO GOES THERE: Norwegian Cruise Line
WHERE: One of the northermost islands in the Bahamas Berry Island chain about 50 miles from Nassau. Norwegian owns 225 acres of the 250-acre island; the remaining land is uninhabited and owned by the Bahamian government.
GETTING THERE: Several of Princess’s Eastern and Western Caribbean itineraries include Princess Cays. Ships anchor offshore and tender passengers into the marina.
PLAYING: Listen to live reggae and calypso music amid mangrove trees. Play volleyball, basketball or head to the sports pier to rent sailboats, watercraft and kayaks as well as snorkeling gear and floats. The coral reef surrounding the island is a favorite of snorkelers, and Pelican’s Perch is a supervised play area for kids featuring a replica of a pirate ship.
EATING: The two open-air barbecue buffets include burgers, dogs, salads and chicken. Three bars serve up tropical drinks.
SHOPPING: Princess owns and operates Tropical Treasures boutique, plus you’ll find several local vendors offering Bahamian crafts and hair braiding.

PRINCESS CAYS

WHO GOES THERE: Princess Cruises
WHERE: It may be isolated, but it’s no island: Princess Cays is actually a 40-acre parcel on the southern tip of the Bahamian island of Eleuthera.
GETTING THERE: The island is actually a 260-acre peninsula along Haiti’s lush, mountainous and secluded north coast.
GETTING THERE: Several of Celebrity Caribbean’s and Celebrity’s Caribbean, Panama Canal and transatlantic sailings visit Labadee. Tenders take passengers from the ships to the island.
PLAYING: Bounce on water trampolines and climb inflatable iceberg-shaped slides at the Columbus Cove aqua park ($15 for 50 minutes). Whiz along the 3,000-foot zip line over the water at Dragon’s Tail beach. Watch African-style dancing, drumming and singing at the folkloric show. Luc’s Splash Bash is the island’s dedicated area for kids, with ground geysers, water cannons and a treasure map trail.
EATING: With nine bars and beverage facilities and three food outlets, you won’t have to hunt for food. Performers stroll about playing Jamaican mento music, an acoustic, folky sound said to be the grandfather of reggae.
SHOPPING: Two Haitian marketplaces offer native crafts, paintings, coffee, woodcarvings, dolls, baskets, clothing and jewelry. (Be prepared to be pressured to buy, and be ready to negotiate.)

LABADEE

WHO GOES THERE: Royal Caribbean
WHERE: Roughly 55 miles north of Nassau in the Bahamian Berry Island chain. Formerly known as Little Stirrup Cay, neighbor of Norwegian’s Great Stirrup Cay.
GETTING THERE: Many of Royal Caribbean’s and Celebrity’s Caribbean sailings. Tenders transport guests from ship to island.
PLAYING: Take a kayak tour through the Bahama Banks, play volleyball at the Powerade Volleyball Court or jump on the floating trampoline at the Aqua Park. Snorkelers can see a sunken airplane and schooner. Little island goers can drive mini Mustangs, Jeep Hurricanes and even a Barbie pink Escalade at the new Fisher-Price Power Wheels track.
EATING: Beach barbecue fare served in an outdoor pavilion with picnic table seating.
SHOPPING: Have your hair braided or shop for souvenirs in the small straw market.

COCO CAY

WHO GOES THERE: Royal Caribbean
WHERE: Roughly 65 miles north of Nassau in the Bahaman Berry Island chain. Formerly known as Little Stirrup Cay, a 40-acre piece of land about 100 miles southeast of Nassau.
GETTING THERE: Most of Holland America’s Caribbean and Panama Canal sailings. Tenders transport guests from the ships to the island.
PLAYING: Take a kayak tour through the Bahama Banks, play volleyball at the Powerade Volleyball Court or jump on the floating trampoline at the Aqua Park. Snorkelers can see a sunken airplane and schooner. Little island goers can drive mini Mustangs, Jeep Hurricanes and even a Barbie pink Escalade at the new Fisher-Price Power Wheels track.
EATING: Beach barbecue fare served in an outdoor pavilion with picnic table seating.
SHOPPING: Have your hair braided or shop for souvenirs in the small straw market.

HALF MOON CAY

WHO GOES THERE: Holland America
WHERE: Use a 65-acre tract of the Bahamas’ Little San Salvador Island, a 2,400-acre piece of land about 100 miles southeast of Nassau.
GETTING THERE: Half Moon Cays Barabara.
PLAYING: The Half Moon Lagoon Aqua Park features a water spout, but be prepared for crowds. Grab a surfside massage in a curtained hut or camp out at one of the shaded benches along the beach. The island is a wildlife reserve, so bring binoculars.
SHOPPING: Have your hair braided or shop for souvenirs in the small straw market.

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