



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

▼ THE CARIBBEAN

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Often called Little England or Island in the Sun, Barbados is the easternmost island in the Caribbean archipelago. It belongs to a chain of islands known as the Lesser Antilles. The island is 166 square miles (430 square kilometers) in size—nearly 2.5 times the size of Washington, D.C. From the central highland area, the terrain slopes gradually to the sea and is interrupted by only a few hilly areas. Moderated by the ocean and by trade winds, the tropical climate provides an average year-round temperature of 85°F (29°C). The rainy season is from June to October.

Barbados has no rivers; instead, rainwater percolates through the soil to form underground wells, which are used for drinking water. The rainwater also forms channels that run to the ocean. A thin layer of topsoil covers the thick layer of coral that underlies most of the island. The soil is very fertile, making the island lush with flowering trees, shrubs, and tropical flowers. Three-fourths of Barbados is suitable for cultivation. Barrier reefs that surround the island make it particularly rich in marine life.

**History.** The original inhabitants of Barbados were Arawak Indians. They disappeared for unknown reasons before European explorers arrived in the 1500s. Portuguese explorers found an abundance of bearded fig trees when they arrived on the island; hence, it was named *Barbados*, which originated from the Portuguese term *os barbudos* (bearded ones). The British came to the island in 1625, when Captain John Powell claimed it in the name of King James I. Two years later, Captain Powell brought the first colonists and settled Holetown. As the population grew, sugarcane was introduced, and slave labor was brought in from Africa. Independence-minded colonists were forced to surrender to England's forces in 1652 by

signing the Articles of Capitulation, which later became the Charter of Barbados.

Barbados freed its slaves between 1834 and 1838, allowed women to vote in 1944, and provided voting rights to all citizens in 1951. A leader of a growing independence movement, Sir Grantley Adams, became the first premier under home rule in 1954. On 30 November 1966, Barbados gained full independence from Great Britain. Errol Barrow was the first prime minister of an independent Barbados. The country maintains ties to Britain as a member of the Commonwealth of Nations.

Since independence, Barbados has enjoyed a high degree of political stability. The island capitalized on its natural strengths and by the 1980s had developed a successful tourist industry. With economic and political stability, the nation was able to provide a high standard of living for its inhabitants.

During the global recession of the early 1990s, the economy suffered various setbacks. After his election in 1991, Prime Minister Erskine Lloyd Sandiford (of the Democratic Labour Party) introduced an austerity package to improve economic conditions. Reforms stabilized the economy but were unpopular among voters. Leaders in parliament also became disillusioned with Sandiford's leadership, forcing him to call for early elections in 1994. A strong voter turnout brought economist Owen Arthur, leader of the Barbados Labour Party, to power as prime minister. Boosted by a strong economy and considerably lower unemployment, Arthur's Barbados Labour Party was reelected overwhelmingly in 1999 and 2003. The 2008 elections saw opposition leader David Thompson of the Democratic Labour Party elected as prime minister. The government continues to seek greater economic growth and reduced unemployment.

## THE PEOPLE

**Population.** The population of Barbados is approximately 280,950 and is growing only slightly. Although the birthrate is steady, emigration holds net growth to less than 1 percent. With about 1,670 persons per square mile (645 per square kilometer), Barbados's high population density makes it seem like a city-country. Around 60 percent of the population lives in urban centers stretching along the western side of the island, which is more sheltered from storms. The capital city of Bridgetown is the largest urban area and serves as a "downtown" for the entire island. Urban, commercial areas are referred to as *town* areas rather than cities. An estimated 90 percent of the population is black, mostly of African origin. An additional 6 percent is of mixed heritage and 4 percent is white. East Indian and Middle Eastern groups comprise a small percentage. The people of Barbados are called Barbadians, but they are often referred to as Bajans.

**Language.** The official language is English. Bajans also speak a dialect that descends from the English spoken by early colonists, indentured servants, and slaves. Referred to as *speaking Bajan* or *broken English*, the dialect is used informally between family and friends. In speaking Bajan, "What are you all doing tonight?" becomes *Whuh wunna doin' tonight?* Numerous proverbs are also expressed in the dialect, including *Day does run 'til night catch it* (Whatever you do will catch up with you in the end).

**Religion.** Although more than one hundred religions are practiced in Barbados, the majority (67 percent) of Barbadians are Protestant Christians. About 40 percent belong to the Anglican Church, 8 percent to Pentecostal churches, and 7 percent to the Methodist Church. The Roman Catholic Church also has a strong presence. Nearly 30 percent of the people belong to smaller Christian and non-Christian organizations or to no church at all. There are also small Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish communities. The first Jewish synagogue was built on the island in 1654.

For many Bajans, religion plays an important role in daily life. The school day begins with an assembly that includes a hymn, prayer, and Bible reading. Many families pray before meals, and most official public functions open with prayer.

**General Attitudes.** Bajans are warm, happy, friendly, and generous. However, they may seem reserved around strangers and are considered somewhat more restrained than their Caribbean neighbors. The success of the country's tourist industry is partly due to Bajan hospitality. A generally peaceful atmosphere in the country allows the police to patrol unarmed. Social unity is important to Barbadians. Their view of life is evident in their carefully kept, pastel-colored homes and in lively festivals that reflect past and present culture. Such festivals often celebrate Bajan's dual African-British heritage.

Bajans find arrogant, aggressive, and ostentatious behavior distasteful. Their independence—their ability as a nation to dictate their own affairs—is important to them. They take great pride in the country's accomplishments in music, sports, education, politics, and economics. The successes of Bajan athletes in cricket, track-and-field, and other sports are celebrated in Calypso songs, national holidays, and gifts from the business community. The people value honesty, humor, and education. Parents generally stress a good education as a means to a better future for their children. A car and a plot of land are other desired possessions.

**Personal Appearance.** North American fashions are popular in Barbados, and many Barbadians shop overseas for clothing.

Women usually wear tailored dresses or blouses and skirts to work, and they get very dressed up for parties and other social events. They wear their finest dresses and hats to church meetings. For casual events, women usually dress in colorful, long skirts with sandals. Sometimes they wear their hair in small braids with colorful beads at the ends. Jeans and T-shirts are popular casual wear for both sexes.

Many (particularly older) men wear lightweight pants with a casual shirt of white, pastel, or flowered fabric. This *shirt-jac* suit generally is accepted everywhere (parties, offices, and churches), but a more formal suit is required for certain events. Younger men may wear tailored pants and a dress shirt in the workplace. Swimwear is limited to the beach and is not worn in the city or other public places.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Bajans generally greet each other with a handshake and a smile. Friends often embrace upon meeting and sometimes give a kiss on the cheek. Similar gestures are exchanged when parting. Young men may greet by bumping with a fist the top of the other's extended fist. A common greeting is *Hello! How are you?* An answer such as *Not bad* is a friendly response. Less formal greetings used by younger people include *Yo, what's up?*, *Wuh you sayin'?* (How are things?), and *How ya gine?* (How are you doing?). Particularly in rural areas, it is considered polite to greet strangers in passing with a *Hello* or a nod. An evening telephone call begins with *Hello, good night.*

Coworkers typically address one another by first name, while a superior generally is addressed by title (*Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, *Miss*) and surname. A superior might also be addressed as *Skipper*, *Admiral*, *Boss-man*, or *Doc*. Friends and relatives may call one another by nickname. Children respectfully address older family friends as *aunt(ie)* or *uncle*.

**Gestures.** Barbadians often use their hands when conversing to emphasize or communicate a point. However, personal space is respected. They call taxis and buses by waving the hand. They often express disgust by clenching the teeth and sucking in air (sounding something like "chupse"); the level of annoyance or contempt can be measured by the loudness of the *chupse*. People may show defiance, anger, or frustration by standing *akimbo* (placing their hands on their hips) while arguing a point. Bajans frequently will fold their arms as a sign that they are paying attention, but such a gesture can also signal defiance. Raising an arm above the head with the palm facing out and waving side-to-side signals good-bye, but a similar gesture with the palm at eye level and a quicker side-to-side motion can indicate disapproval.

It is considered polite to forfeit seats to pregnant women or the elderly on public buses. Seated bus passengers may show courtesy by holding a standing passenger's parcel or child. If one must pass between people who are talking, one should wait for a break in the conversation to ask for permission to pass by saying *Excuse me please?* Occasional (not constant) eye contact during conversation is appropriate. Pointing at people with the index finger is considered rude.

**Visiting.** Friends and relatives may visit at home unannounced, usually on weekend afternoons. A favorite time for men to get together is Sunday morning, when topics of conversation range from politics to cricket. Visits often take place on the patio or front porch. Otherwise, a visitor is invited into the parlor or living room and offered a drink (juice, soda, beer, or rum) along with sandwiches and biscuits.

Visiting also occurs at cricket matches and other sporting events when old friends see each other. Shops in the country districts and barber salons in the town are important places for lively discussion, especially around election time.

**Eating.** Bajans eat three meals a day. Families usually try to gather for breakfast and dinner, although this is subject to varying schedules. Sunday lunch is a traditional family meal. For most people, the traditional teatime has been replaced with midmorning and midafternoon snacks, which may include tea, coffee, juice, fruit (mangoes, cherries, tamarinds, bananas, or oranges), cheese, chocolate, peanuts, or sweet bread (usually made with coconut). Barbadians eat in the continental style; the fork is in the left hand, and the knife remains in the right. They keep the elbows off the table.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The extended family is important in Barbados, and parents, children, grandparents, and cousins enjoy substantial interaction. This pattern is changing somewhat with modernization, but it is still important. Extended families may live together or near one another.

A high percentage of children are born out of wedlock. Teenage pregnancies continue to be a problem. Divorce is increasing. Single-parent families (usually with only the mother) are common. In homes where the father is present, he is the leader. Economic circumstances have caused many women to seek employment outside the home, leaving the care of children to grandparents. Nearly half of the workforce is female. People who have emigrated to the United States, the United Kingdom, or Canada for work still maintain extended family ties through monetary support and visits.

**Housing.** Many families live in traditional *chattel houses*. These look like wooden mobile homes, set on coral stone three or four feet above ground for better air circulation. They are designed for easy assembly and disassembly, as plantation workers in the past often were required to move from one working area to another. They are so well built that they may be passed from one generation to the next.

Other permanent homes are made of brick or concrete and are typically set back only a few feet from busy streets. Many are painted with pastel colors, and families commonly paint their homes before Christmas in preparation for holiday visitors. If there is a yard, it is usually little more than exposed earth. Soil in the cities tends to be too poor to support much plant growth. The typical rural dwelling is a home made from wooden boards and raised on concrete blocks about two feet above the ground. Back yards tend to be quite big, allowing people to raise small livestock, such as chickens, and even a cow, sheep or goat.

Besides these traditional urban and rural homes, there is a growing number of suburban homes where upper middle-class Barbadians live. These homes are usually situated on one-half or one-acre lots. Multi-car garages, swimming pools, tennis courts, hot tubs, and even in-house gyms are becoming popular. The homes are made of brick, and red "Spanish tiles" make a popular accessory. Sprawling lawns dotted with fruit trees surround these properties, which are usually guarded by a fence.

**Dating and Marriage.** Dating usually begins in the early teens. Young Bajans socialize at school, church, *fetes* (parties), the beach, the cinema, sporting events, and each other's homes. Public displays of affection between couples (beyond holding hands) are uncommon.

Many people do not marry. Even in two-parent homes, some couples are not married. Couples who have lived together for years are protected by common-law legislation. Many young people wait to marry until after they have established themselves financially or have begun their careers. Weddings traditionally are held in a church, followed by a gala reception in a local hall, hotel, or restaurant. The reception typically features an elaborate wedding cake and music by a Bajan steel band.

**Life Cycle.** The birth of a child is usually marked by a baptismal celebration, where relatives, friends, and neighbors gather at church. Barbadians tend to give their children African names with very positive meanings. Teenagers reach major milestones at 18, when they can get a driver's license, and at 21, when they become eligible to vote. Barbadians are generally considered adults only when they reach voting age.

At 11, Barbadian children traditionally had to undergo a major and often quite stressful academic rite of passage. Following the British education model, they had to take the so-called 11-plus exam, a grueling three-hour exam, testing skills in mathematics, English, and composition. The results, which were sometimes published in the newspaper, determined which secondary school a child could attend. In the 1990s, the schools moved away from this model and adopted a model based on three or four years of continuous assessment.

Regardless of one's religious affiliation, funeral attendance is considered important. Bajans make a special effort to attend services of even distant relatives and acquaintances. The number of attendees at a funeral often indicates the deceased's standing in the community.

**Diet.** Bajan food is a unique combination of African and English traditions. Staples include rice, *peas* (legumes), potatoes, chicken, and fish. The national dish is flying fish and *cou cou* (made of okra and cornmeal). Also popular are lobster, shrimp, red snapper, turtle, tuna, kingfish, and *dorado*, a local fish. Sea urchin eggs are a delicacy. Goats and black-belly sheep provide meat.

The tropical soil yields mangoes, papayas, bananas, cucumbers, tomatoes, guavas, avocados, coconuts, squash, eggplant, breadfruit, and numerous other vegetables. Popular local dishes include *jug-jug* (sorghum and green pigeon peas), *pepperpot* (a spicy stew), *macaroni pie* (made with cheese or mincemeat), and *conkies* (cornmeal, coconut, pumpkin, raisins, sweet potatoes, and spices steamed in a banana leaf). Favorite pastries include *jam puffs* (jam-filled sourdough pastry) and turnovers (pastries filled with coconut and sugar). Fast foods such as pizza, hamburgers, fried chicken, and hot dogs are popular.

Both cow and goat milk are popular. *Tea* is the term used for any breakfast drink (tea, Milo, Ovaltine). Barbados is well-known for its rum.

**Recreation.** Cricket is the national sport. Bajans also enjoy soccer, cycling, basketball, rugby, and volleyball. With excellent wind and water conditions, surfing and windsurfing are favorites. Scuba and skin diving are popular because the area has extensive coral reefs, clear water, and interesting dive sites, some of which feature the wrecks of sunken ships. People enjoy swimming, particularly on the more sheltered south and west coasts.

Other sporting activities include horse racing, squash, tennis, and table tennis. Favorite games are bridge, chess, dominoes, and *draughts* (checkers), the national game. Sunday and holiday picnics at the beach are popular. Young people enjoy *liming* (hanging out) in town on weekends. Vacationing Bar-

## Barbados

badians may visit another English-speaking island or relatives in the United States, Canada, or England.

**The Arts.** Music and dance are intrinsic parts of Bajan culture. Calypso, reggae, *dancehall* (of Jamaican origin), *soca* (a mixture of soul music from the United States and calypso music), and North American pop styles are favored. Musicians compete in annual competitions. *Wukking up*, a uniquely Bajan dance style, features rhythmic waist-winding movements. It is usually performed to calypso. Popular folk songs are thought to originate from West African slave songs that date back to the 1600s.

Barbados's arts are intertwined with the island's natural surroundings, especially the ocean, flora, and fauna. Weavers incorporate plants and natural materials into baskets and mats. Jewelry made from shells, feathers, and wood set in copper or silver is common. Potters make use of red clay, which is an abundant resource, creating an array of pots, tiles, and domestic items. Many painters and sculptors have found success in Barbados's prosperous art market, and several galleries and museums display artists' work.

**Holidays.** Four annual festivals celebrate important events in Barbados. The Hometown Festival (three days in February) celebrates the arrival of the first settlers; the Oistins Fish Festival, held on Easter weekend, is a tribute to the fishing industry; the Crop Over Festival (June–early August) celebrates the end of the sugarcane harvest; and the National Independence Festival of the Creative Arts (Nov.) is an opportunity for people to display various talents.

Other holidays include New Year's Day, Errol Barrow Day (21 Jan.), Easter (Friday–Monday), May Day (1 May), Whitmonday, Kadooment Day (first Monday in August), Emancipation Day (3 Aug.), United Nations Day (first Monday in October), Independence Day (30 Nov.), Christmas, and Boxing Day (26 Dec.). Kadooment Day is the culmination of the Crop Over Festival. On this day, trucks broadcasting calypso and other music follow *bands* (groups of people in brightly colored costumes) parading and dancing through the streets. The festivities include costume and music contests, street vendors, and craft displays.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Barbados is a parliamentary democracy. The country is divided into 11 parishes and the capital city, Bridgetown. As a sovereign member of the Commonwealth of Nations, Barbados recognizes Queen Elizabeth II as the head of state. She is represented in-country by a governor-general (Clifford Husbands).

The prime minister is leader of the majority party in the House of Assembly, which has 30 seats. The current prime minister is David Thompson. Parliament also has a Senate, whose 21 members are appointed. National elections are held at least every five years. The major political parties are the Barbados Labour Party and the Democratic Labour Party. All citizens may vote at age 18.

**Economy.** Barbados has one of the highest standards of living in the Caribbean. Women earn a comparable share of the nation's income. Tourism, light manufacturing, and the sugar industry are primary sources of foreign exchange. Tourism has been the largest industry and employer in Barbados for more than 20 years.

### POPULATION & AREA

Population .....	280,946 (rank=176)
Area, sq. mi. ....	166 (rank=189)
Area, sq. km. ....	430

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank .....	31 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women .....	30 of 156 countries
Real GDP per capita .....	\$17,297
Adult literacy rate .....	99% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate .....	11 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy .....	74 (male); 79 (female)

Natural resources include fish, sugarcane, tropical fruits, cotton, crude oil, and natural gas. The country exports sugar, rum, and textiles. It trades with the United States, other Caribbean nations, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Barbados is an active member of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM). The currency is the Barbadian dollar (BBD), which is pegged to the U.S. dollar at a fixed 2–1 ratio.

**Transportation and Communications.** The majority of Barbadian households have at least one car. However, most people make use of the island's efficient network of public buses, minibuses, and taxis. The island has a central paved highway and an adequate network of roads. Following the British tradition, cars travel on the left side of the road. Barbados has one international airport.

One government-owned television station and one satellite-subscription television service serve the island; there are many radio stations. In addition to two daily newspapers, foreign-language papers are available. Telecommunications links to other nations are well established, and internet use is growing.

**Education.** Barbados boasts one of the finest public education systems in the Caribbean. More than 85 percent of pupils complete primary schooling and attend secondary school. Attendance is compulsory until age 16. Private schools have less than 5 percent of the total enrollment. Primary and secondary schools, patterned after British schools, generally require uniforms. The government pays for qualified students to study at the University of the West Indies, a regional college with campuses in Barbados, Trinidad, and Jamaica. Technical-training schools, as well as schools for physically and mentally handicapped children, are also available.

**Health.** The government-operated National Health Service includes the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and a network of *polyclinics*, which provide free medical and dental care to all Barbadians. A private hospital also offers services. Home to the largest desalination facility in the Caribbean, Barbados offers its inhabitants a secure and reliable source of water, despite frequent droughts. Tap water is safe to drink, and most homes have running water.

## AT A GLANCE

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