

ESCAPE

FIVE PAGES OF THE BEST TRAVEL IN THE WORLD



WE FIND OUT WHY PORTUGAL IS THE IDEAL PLACE FOR A FAMILY GETAWAY

DISCOVERING PARADISE

IT'S JUST BEACHY: Enjoy the miles of Cuban coastline

Eugene Costello crosses the Atlantic to explore one of the Caribbean's most stunning islands...

ON October 28 1492, Christopher Columbus proved his naysayers wrong by establishing that one could indeed sail west from Spain around the world.

He landed off the coast at Bariay, now a national park, in Holguín province on the northeast coast, where he is said to have claimed that Cuba was "the most beautiful land human eyes have ever seen". Despite the best efforts of Hurricane Irma earlier this month, thankfully that is still the case.

We were visiting the Bariay on a day

trip from the hotel-fringed strip of sandy coastline that is Guardalavaca. Such day trips are easily arranged via your hotel, or through your tour operator in advance.

A highlight of the trip to Bariay was being greeted at an Arawak village (home to poor indigenous tribes of the Caribbean driven to near-extinction by the Spanish colonisation of the islands) with coconuts filled with rum.

Women in traditional Arawak costume performed dances and shows for us and, though a little kitsch, it was

a great day out for when you can drag yourself away from the hotel beach or poolside lounger.

Guardalavaca compares very favourably to Cuba's best-known hotel resort area, Varadero, near to Havana on the north west coast of the island. There are fewer hotels here, meaning you can walk for a mile along the beach without finding yourself in

another hotel's fiefdom (all beaches in Cuba are public, a far more civilised arrangement than the private, fenced-off stretches of sand found elsewhere in the Caribbean).

Another crucial benefit Cuba enjoys over the rest of the Caribbean is that it is wholly safe for tourists - there are few attacks on tourists and not even any beach-hawkers hassling you to buy their tat. You →

A WARM WELCOME: Eugene met members of the Arawak tribe



This week's top late deals

You can count on the Canaries...

October is a great time to book a holiday to somewhere warm and wonderful like the Canary Islands, because while the colder weather takes hold of Ireland, the temperature on these Spanish islands still hit highs of 25°C and you have a wide selection of resorts to choose from.

The south of Tenerife is the warmest part of the island and visitors make a particular beeline for resorts such as Los Cristianos, Playa de las Americas and Costa Adeje.

On Gran Canaria, head to the resort of Maspalomas to experience the vast sand dunes and visit Palmitos Park, a zoological and botanical park. The park has a dolphinarium, an aquarium that boasts marine favourites such as the clown fish, and loveable mammals like meerkats on dry land.

In Lanzarote, you can explore Timanfaya National Park and tour the volcanoes. It's even possible to cross this volcanic landscape aboard a camel.

Falcon has deals to the Canaries this October including seven nights from October 13 at the Labranda Oasis Mango in Los Cristianos, Tenerife, self-catering, from €469pp.

On the 16th in Lanzarote, a week all-inclusive at the El Trebol Apartments in Costa Tegui costs from €669pp, while on the 19th, in Gran Canaria, a week at the Mannix Apartments in Las Palmas costs from €569pp. See falcon.holidays.ie for more details.

Sea the best of Barbados...

One of Barbados' newest beach-front developments, Ocean Two has raised the bar for self-catering accommodation on the island's south coast, with suites that are furnished to a high standard and amenities such as flat screen TVs and fully equipped kitchens.

Facilities at the four-star Ocean Two Resort & Residences include rooftop terrace with small pool, fitness centre, restaurant and choice of bars.

If booked before October 16, you can enjoy a week there from €1,269 per person up to April 15 with tropicalsky.ie, including flights and transfers.

Visit the Kingdom of the North

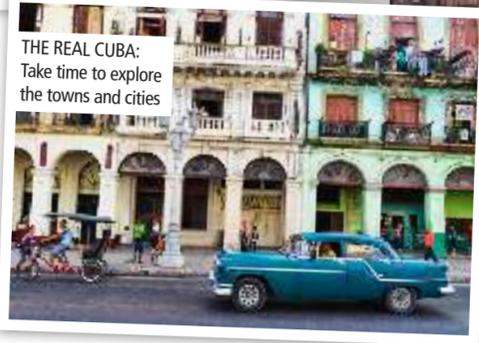
Perched on the tip of the famous Causeway Coastal Route, the stunning 17th century Ballygally Castle Hotel is a perfect spot for a Game of Thrones location tour. Many scenes from the hit HBO show were filmed around the Causeway Coast or in the nearby Glens of Antrim.

They have a special rate of £75pps, with overnight B&B accommodation and a Game of Thrones Afternoon Tea, which includes Lannister Egg Rolls, Baratheon Bread, Little Fingers Chicken Caesar wrap and Jon Snow cakes. Guests will also be able to see the hotel's Game of Thrones door, which is made from one of the famous Dark Hedges trees.

For more details or to book, visit hastingshotels.com or call 048 2858 1066.



SHORE THING: See where Columbus landed in 1492



THE REAL CUBA: Take time to explore the towns and cities

can relax in the knowledge that you are on an island that prides itself on friendliness, unlike some destinations nearby I could think of.

Prices are also significantly lower than the rest of the Caribbean and, thanks in part to the overwhelming Spanish influence since the late 15th century on this, the largest of the Caribbean islands, there are plenty of interesting sights to enjoy.

A word about the hotel - we stayed at the Blau Costa Verde, a four-star all-inclusive joint venture (as all hotels are) with the government. Its rooms are decently sized, and the resort sprawls across several acres of outlying accommodation blocks, at the heart of which is the main building, where you'll find reception, the buffet restaurant and the main bar.

There are a number of pools, tennis courts and a beautiful white sandy beach with a beach shack serving up seafood and salad, burgers and alcohol. Eat and drink to your heart's content - it's all included in the price, and the super-friendly staff and barmen are not remotely stingy, so fill yer boots.

The main buffet restaurant is where you'll enjoy breakfast, with a good array of cooked food (if not a full Irish, you'll find more or less a full English), with fruit galore for the health-conscious and a short-order chef at hand to whisk up a freshly made omelette.

In the evenings there is a fine spread of meat and fish dishes, both Cuban-style food (think rice, beans and pork) and Italian cuisine. Again, if you want to eat fresh, the chef will rustle you up a sauce there and then to serve up with

your choice of pasta, with plenty of ingredients to choose from.

There are also two à la carte restaurants on offer, though you need to book in the morning if you want to eat there that night. One specialises in Spanish tapas-style meals, while the other is French influenced and where I had my best meal in Cuba. My appetiser

Cuba is upping its game to cater for discerning tourists

of beef consommé, a first plate of asparagus and poached egg and a main of tender rare steak, served with potato fondant and cep mushrooms, was as good a meal as you'd find anywhere in Dublin, and all included in the cost.

It's also worth pointing out that your stay at the Blau Costa Verde allows you to enjoy hospitality at the resort's even fancier sister, the Playa Pesquero Hotel, half a mile or so along the beach,

Wander up there for free drinks, or speak to front desk to book an evening meal. This tip came from a member of staff - I don't know if it's widely advertised, so you didn't hear it from me!

Now, once you're here, you're free to spend your holiday enjoying free drinks and food and lazing around the pools, on the beach and enjoying the shows they put on most nights - and why not? You've paid for it already, so you're entitled to make the most of it.

But if you have a curious spirit and would like to go off the beaten track, there are a plenty of trips that allow you see a little more of the country. I've already mentioned Bariay, Columbus' landing spot in Cuba, and below are a couple more.

To see the real Cuba, you can always arrange a day trip to the provincial capital, Holguín, which is an hour's drive away. It's a typical town arranged around a main square, and you'll find plenty of restaurants listed on TripAdvisor should you decide to visit.

There is also a steep climb up some 458 steps to the summit La Loma de la Cruz (the Hill of the Cross), which provides a fabulous view over the city,

TIME TO RELAX: The hotel has great facilities



and indeed right across the valley.

For a couple of low-maintenance day trips, speak to the hotel reception. The first is a visit to BioParque Rocazul, a national park about 20 minutes' drive from the hotel. There, you have La Casa del Campesino, a simple farmer's hut that's wooden-built, with a thatched roof supported by rough tree trunk beams and decorated with traditional dark furniture.

There is a kitchen, a living room and two bedrooms, a double and two singles, and you can even stay the night, I was told, for the princely sum of 58 Cuban pesos (converted, about €50). But if you just want to visit for the

TRAVEL INFORMATION

PRICE: Enjoy seven nights in Cuba from just €1849pp. The price includes return flights, a Cuban visa, transfers, one night in the three-star Sevilla Hotel, Havana, on a B&B basis and six nights in the Blau Costa Verde, Guardalavaca, on an all-inclusive basis, departing in November 2017. Price is based on two adults sharing. All prices are subject to availability,

and are correct at time of going to print. €100 deposit only fares are available. If you wish to travel via the US, please contact the Cuban Consulate in Dublin for an entry permit. Ref: 109147. Contact Sunway for more information on 01-2311800 or visit www.sunway.ie

Eugene Costello travelled as a guest of the Cuba Tourist Office. For more information about visiting Cuba, contact the Cuba Tourist Office by logging on to www.travel2cuba.co.uk

day, do - it's a beautiful area of farmland among mangroves and trees. We had lunch outside the farmhouse, a whole pig roasted on a spit.

A five-minute walk down a track through mangroves will take you to a jetty, from where you go fishing or take a catamaran trip.

And for a real treat, spend a day visiting Cayo Saetia; it's a beautiful peninsula, effectively an island reached by a one-hour catamaran trip across the bay from Melilla (the drive to Melilla from the hotel, about two hours, is an eye-opener in itself, through farmland in which wooden farmhouses stand beside fields of crops and, occasionally, livestock).

From Melilla, the boat will drop you at the sort of white beach, with gently shelving turquoise waters, that one instantly associates with a certain Leonardo DiCaprio film. There is a terrace restaurant - el Ranchón - jutting out above the beach, where they serve up a terrific buffet lunch

that boasts a fine array of meat dishes, fish, salad and vegetables.

We then clambered aboard a truck for a drive around the 'island', which they called a safari - and they were right. We saw antelope, buffalo, ostriches, herds of zebra, a couple of giraffes and more parrots than you could shake a stick at. Perhaps they arrived with Columbus...

It was the highlight of a wonderful week that showed how Cuba is really upping its game to cater for a more discerning international tourist who wants something a little more culturally inspiring than two weeks in Torremolinos.

My only final point would be to ensure that you have at least a night in Havana. It's impossible not to fall in love with that vibrant, throbbing city with its location of the north shore of the island looking across to Florida and the Keys, both of which will hopefully also soon be bouncing back from Hurricane Irma as well. +