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## The heat is on

With incentives back on the agenda, the Caribbean is set to shine... Ellie Evans discovers what these tropical islands have to offer

**W**ith its warm climate and equally warm hospitality, the Caribbean – long a popular incentive destination for North America – is starting to welcome more UK business as the British appetite for incentives returns.

Agencies including Black Tomato, AddingValue and Conference Solutions have all organised island stays for clients drawn by the lure of sun, sea and sand, with all-inclusive resorts an increasingly popular option.

And with a huge range of activities on offer in these 30 territories, from water sports and diving to bobsledding in Jamaica, there's plenty to pack the itinerary.

Sandals, which recently opened a new resort in Barbados, saw the UK corporate market overtake the wedding group market last year. Traditionally a couples resort, Sandals, with 15 resorts on six islands (Jamaica, St Lucia, Antigua, Grenada, Barbados and the Bahamas), has become a popular choice for event planners seeking full budgetary control.

"We are starting to see more UK and European MICE trips coming to our resorts: Jamaica, St Lucia and Antigua were the favoured destinations for travel last year, but with the opening of Sandals Barbados in January, the enquiries have started to come in thick and fast

the brand's two UK events managers.

Almost 10,000 Britons travelled to Jamaica on business between January and November 2014, up 13.2 per cent on the same period in 2013. At 6.2 per cent, it's still a small slice of the total 158,777 visitors from the UK – but it's on the up.

Conference Solutions ran a five-night trip for 40 delegates to Sandals Grande Riviera in April 2014 for a furniture retail company, and is taking another group to Sandals Regency La Toc St Lucia this month. "The reason that the Caribbean is appealing is the weather and the



good quality of the inclusive resorts which, for me, is the most important thing," says director Amy-Jo Dalton (left).

For an incentive with impact, the recently refurbished 529-room

Grande Riviera resort in Ocho Rios offers butler service in its villas – they'll unpack your suitcase, book your table for dinner and even run your bath. It's well equipped for meetings and welcomes 30 groups on average each month: the High Mountain Ballroom is ideal for a banquet for up to 230, with the deck outside perfect for cocktails, while the Pavilion can accommodate 1,200 for a reception.

With its European-style architecture, Sandals Whitehouse has 360 rooms in three 'villages' spread along a stunning two-mile beach and offers plenty of flexible meeting space, including a ballroom for 550 people.

For the ultimate event, you can't beat the

private island at Sandals Royal Caribbean: just a few minutes' boat ride from the main resort, the island can comfortably accommodate 400 people for a party or team building exercises. The resort, in Montego Bay, plans to add five Maldivian-style over-the-water suites to the island this year, complete with private outdoor hot tubs and showers and, in November, it unveiled 14 refurbished luxury butler suites, bringing the total number of rooms to 210.

Conference facilities at the resorts are free to use and Sandals recently launched a number of special group offers, including butler suite upgrades; the team are also

cocktail receptions or private dinners.

Nearby, the Montego Bay Convention Centre has hosted the Climate Investment Funds 2014 Partnership Forum and the International Women's Forum. It can accommodate 6,000 theatre-style in its main exhibition hall, while the sumptuous Grand Ballroom, which can be divided into three, has capacity for 2,000 people; a further nine meeting rooms are available, the largest of which suits 600 delegates.



Black Tomato is using the Half Moon Resort in Montego Bay for two all-inclusive incentives this year, and Chetan Shah (left), head of operations, says it's a

destination that continues to impress clients. "The stunning natural environment, growing selection of excellent hotels and

hassle-free flight access keeps the region high on incentive consideration lists and is an exciting one to pitch," he said. One of the major draws of the Caribbean, according to Jo Meddings (below), Corporate Rewards' head of events, is the variety of options.

"From their idyllic beaches, to all-year-round sunshine and stunning scenery, the Caribbean offers travellers a once-in-a-lifetime experience," she says – though warns the cost of travel, and the time it takes, can be steep.



British Airways and Virgin fly to Jamaica, which takes around 10 hours. Historically, Brits have tended to favour Barbados as it's slightly closer, and Rebecca Duncan, Virgin Atlantic's partnership development manager – MICE, confirms that Barbados, along with Havana, are the most popular Caribbean destinations for 2015.

Sandals Barbados opened in January on Dover Beach, and features new swim-up river suites giving guests access to the island's longest lagoon pool. It has 280 bedrooms and a new conference room split over two levels which can cater for up to 80 on each floor theatre-style.

And Sandals' chairman, Gordon 'Butch' Stewart, has announced plans for a new conference centre on Grenada, where the group recently opened Sandals LaSource Grenada.

For maximum impact, Richard Branson's Necker Island, in the British Virgin Islands, can be hired exclusively from US\$65,000 (£42k) a night for up to 30 guests, including all food and drink and a dedicated team of 100 staff. AddingValue took a group of 23 from a financial services company in December, with an activity-packed three-day itinerary which included kayaking, windsurfing, water-skiing and a tennis competition.

The agency's Randle Stonier says: "There are a few logistical challenges in getting there but it is small and is a premium product. It is very exclusive and aspirational, which is why it worked so well for our group."

Maarten Tromp, regional director of corporate and incentive sales at Silversea Cruises, said all-inclusive cruises are also an increasingly popular



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incentive option for the Caribbean as they offer flexibility along with budgetary control.

With its Silver Cloud carrying 293 passengers, and Silver Shadow fewer than 400, Tromp added that its small ships can go to the Bounty island-style spots bigger vessels can't access.

## WHO to contact

### Caribbean Tourism Organization

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## Around the Islands

### ST KITTS AND NEVIS:

St Kitts' Belle Mont Farm and Kittitian Hill opened in December, and combines a boutique luxury resort with a strong sustainable ethos. Paradise Beach Nevis Hotel and Spa opened in January, and features three and four-bedroomed luxury villas in lush surroundings, and the Ocean Terrace Inn in St Kitts reopened on 1 March as a four-star boutique hotel after extensive refurbishment.

### PUERTO RICO:

Puerto Rico, home to the largest airport and cruise homeport in the Caribbean, will host Routes Americas 2016; the remodelled Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport is also set to open next year. New hotel openings include the Hyatt Place Manati, while the Ritz-Carlton, San Juan, is renovating its 2,800 sqm ballroom space and the Hilton Ponce Golf & Casino Resort has completed a multi-million dollar renovation.



*Silversen's smaller ships are ideal for accessing Bounty island-style spots*