



HIGH LIFE
Apes Hill's elevated holes offer great views as well as challenges.

RUSSELL KIRK

BAJAN BRILLIANCE

With its ever-changing terrain, challenging fairways, high-tech Performance Centre, and to-die-for views, Apes Hill is the jewel in the Caribbean crown as a premium golfing destination. // By Peter Swain

CARIBBEAN COURSES ARE typically clifftop or beachside affairs affording grand vistas but little topographical variety. Not so Apes Hill—a beauty in Barbados, designed by the late Ron Kirby, occupying one of the highest points of this island nation. Taking full advantage of serious elevation changes, dramatic coral outcrops, lakes, and even caves—along with the requisite impressive Atlantic and Caribbean views—Apes Hill has it all.

The polishing of this particular tropical diamond has, however, been a 15-year journey. Back in 2009, 18 scenic holes were routed around and over deep gullies and giant bearded fig trees in an old sugar plantation—a visually

stunning if challenging proposition. Then, in 2017, financial difficulties closed the club.

But in 2019, Canadian entrepreneur Glenn Chamandy stepped in. Canadians have an eye for Caribbean potential—witness Ben Cowan-Dewar's success at Cabot St. Lucia—and Apes Hill's new owner was no exception, quickly setting about injecting fresh dynamism and capital into the rolling 470-acre estate. The brief for designer Kirby, who was a long-time Robert Trent Jones and Jack Nicklaus collaborator, was "to make golf at Apes Hill a truly enjoyable playing experience for golfers of all abilities."

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Under the eagle eye of Kirby and Walker Cup legend Roddy Carr, 50 of 100 fairway bunkers were removed to encourage ambitious driving, and sightlines improved. With sustainability to the fore, fairways were reseeded with drought-tolerant Zoysia Zorro grass and the greens with TifEagle, all irrigated by the club’s own rainwater-fed 58-million-gallon reservoir (the club has since gained certification from environmental education organization Audubon International).

Before a round, players can fine-tune their rhythm in the brand-new Performance Centre, equipped with Full Swing and PuttView technology, offering instant, visual feedback interpreted by Scottish golf director Jody Addison. “Until now, elite amateurs in the Caribbean had to travel to the United States to hone their game in a teaching facility like this, but now they don’t have to,” says Addison. He also supervises the multibrand club fitting facility, while rentals are TaylorMade Stealth and P770s.

The immaculately conditioned course itself has been “softened;” it’s still a stern 7,041-yard test from the tips, but four sets of tees ensure it’s now more inviting for mid-handicappers. After a gentle opener, the second hole, a drivable 255-yard par-4 guarded by a cascading creek, bunkers, and coral rock, offers a glimpse of the strategic challenges ahead. The par 3s—5, 8, 12, and 16—are some of the defining holes of the round, with the signature 16th “Cave Hole”—played over water to a green perched in front of a giant limestone cavern—having a genuine “wow” factor. After the short par-4 17th, a high-drama finish is provided by a monstrous downhill par-5 with a gully snaking down the left side and round the back of the green.

But what if scores are all square after 18? Apes Hill has used a lake between the final green and the clubhouse to create a tie-breaker, the 19th, a replica of the infamous par-3 17th at Sawgrass. It demands the same 139-yard tee shot

onto an island green but can also be played from just 100 yards. Nearest the pin or in the hole, the winners can then celebrate in the bar and newly opened clubhouse restaurant, the Noisy Cricket.

For those unprepared to take on the championship course, there’s Little Ape, a par-3 track with nine holes between 95 and 145 yards, some over water, which requires, according to Addison, “just three clubs: a wedge, putter, and a beer”. The sporting story continues with two tennis and eight padel courts, all floodlit to allow early and late play, as well as walking trails, mountain biking, moonlight yoga, pilates, plus a soon-to-be-built health club with a beachside hotel.

Fifty-four new homes have so far been sold and started in what is destined to become one of the Caribbean’s elite sporting communities. Meanwhile, guests staying in any of 30 three- and four-bedroom villas can also play the two courses at nearby Sandy Lane, including Tom Fazio’s Green Monkey, and at Royal Westmoreland, and enjoy dinner at the likes of the chic Cliff in Holetown.

Apes Hill is primarily a demanding, if supremely scenic, test of golf, but it’s also an outward-looking, family-friendly club. Boasting easy access and some of the region’s best hospitality, it’s a place of welcome for allcomers. apeshill.com

➔ Grantley Adams International Airport: 18 miles



RUSSELL KIRK (3)



CARIBBEAN KING
Ron Kirby’s design makes the most of the beautiful Bajan landscapes.