

# POLO IN PARADISE



Diamonds International proudly sponsors many premier polo events throughout the Caribbean.

Courtesy of Diamonds International

*Why locals and visitors have fallen in love with this traditional team sport.*

By Amy Seigel

**W**hether you're talking about backyard cricket games, exotic scuba expeditions, or a round of beachside golf, sports are an integral part of life in the Caribbean. And along with sunshine and sand, sporting adventures are quickly becoming a key element of many Caribbean vacations. While polo may not be the first thing that springs to mind when you think of island activities, the “the sport of kings” is a big part of the sporting tradition in the English Islands of Barbados and Jamaica, as well as other Caribbean nations. The combination of stunning scenery and heart-stopping polo action make the Caribbean Islands an ideal holiday destination for the polo enthusiast, or the perfect place to take in your very first game.

Polo was first recorded on the islands in the late 1800s when the British Cavalry brought the game to Barbados. Although the sport has been something of an institution on the island for nearly 200 years, the last three years have seen some changes in the way the game is played in the islands. The construction of several new, world-class fields with superb facilities is making the Caribbean—specifically, Jamaica, Barbados and Costa Rica—a popular winter training site for teams and players from colder climates, and a prime destination for polo-enthusiasts from around the globe.

And when you consider the sights, sounds and smells involved in viewing a match—the dashing players on their



Courtesy of Apes Hill Club

**A polo player from Apes Hill in Barbados rides at full gallop after a tiny ball, heading to the goal.**

spirited mounts, the emerald fields, the thundering of hooves and crack of the mallet striking the ball, the musty-sweet smell of the horses—it’s easy to see why this sport is experiencing a renaissance today in the Caribbean Islands.

**The Game**

Thought to have originated amidst the marauding tribes of skilled horsemen that roamed Central Asia some 2,500 years ago, today polo is still arguably one of the most awe-inspiring of all spectator sports. Radiating outwards from the steppes of Central Asia, the game eventually spread to Japan, China, Tibet and India where it was discovered by 19th century British colonial tea planters who brought it home to Europe, and abroad to the colonies, the commonwealth and beyond. The rest, as they say, is history.

Long considered the ultimate test of the prowess and military skill of princes and warriors, polo is an intensely physical sport that demands the utmost skill, strength and fitness from both its two- and four-legged participants. Though at times the flow of the game resembles an intricate ballet, a closer look reveals a rough and tumble battle—a



**Polo is thought to have originated in Central Asia 2,500 years ago.**

contest of sweat, dirt and hot blood.

Polo players spend endless hours in the saddle perfecting their riding and shooting skills, training their horses, and gaining the confidence necessary to play the game at breakneck speeds with a combination

of recklessness, precision and dexterity not often found in the world of sport.

Like their riders, polo ponies are the product of many hours of rigorous training and conditioning. Though careful breeding is often a factor, ponies are schooled daily to develop the sharp handling, sensitive mouth, and agility a 1,000-pound animal needs to sprint down the field, bump an opponent or stop suddenly, then turn and gallop back in the opposite direction. Great ponies combine speed and heart with a controlled intensity common to all great athletes.

“The spectator attraction to polo is obviously the speed, the possible danger, and challenges of riding flat out on a 1,000-pound pony, striking at a small white ball,” says Sir Charles “Cow” Williams, a veteran polo player and patron of the new Waterhall Polo



Courtesy of Diamonds International

**“Bumping” an opponent is a tactic skilled players use to steal the ball from the opposing team.**





### The popular Diamonds International/Piaget matchup at Holders Hill Polo Club in Barbados.

development in Barbados. Add to that an atmosphere of relaxed elegance, and you begin to understand why locals and tourists alike are flocking to Caribbean polo matches in record numbers.

At many clubs, spectators are encouraged to stay on and enjoy some of the social activity that takes place after the sound of hoof beats on turf has long since faded into the tropical night. “In polo, all the competitive banter between competing teams is always played out at the bar in the clubhouse,” says Sir Charles. And though not all clubs will have scheduled social events after every game, at Holder’s Hill in St. James, Barbados matches are catered with a full tea and dinner available, and on “chukka nights” (the nights in the clubhouse after an afternoon of practice chukkas, or periods within a polo match) the members barbeque steaks and burgers in a relaxed, family atmosphere.

And if you decide to try your hand at knocking around a few balls, lessons are available at a few clubs throughout the islands. Newcomers, however, should be forewarned: polo is frequently described as an affliction rather than a game thanks to its tendency to eclipse all other distractions—be they professional, recreational, or familial—and the rather daunting costs involved. It’s no accident that polo is often referred to as “a game to pass the time while your super-yacht goes for repairs.”

## POLO IN THE ISLANDS

### Barbados and Jamaica

Polo was introduced to the islands of Barbados and Jamaica in the late 19th century by the British Cavalry officers, who played regular matches in front of the drill halls at the Garrison Savannah in Barbados and Up Park Camp in Jamaica. Over time, the officers began inviting local sugar planters—who enjoyed pitting their equitation skills against those of the highly trained military men—to play with them, and soon these regular polo matches developed into well-attended social events offering bold young officers an opportunity to showcase their bravery and talents to the single ladies of the day.

Today, polo is very much alive in both Barbados and Jamaica. Jamaica sports five clubs—the best known club being the Chukka Cove Polo Club at Laughlands—and around fifty players of all ages and abilities. And in Barbados, the construction of exquisite new fields at Waterhall and Holders Hill—longtime home of the Barbados Polo Club—in St. James, and Clifton and Lion’s Castle in St. Thomas, has transformed Barbados into the polo destination of choice for many of the worlds’ elite polo competitors.

Family traditions are strong in the islands, and the tradition of fathers and sons playing side by side has played a significant role in ensuring the sport’s survival, championing

## RULES EXPLAINED

The seemingly simple objective of a polo match is to score points by hitting a ball between the opponents’ goal posts, much like in soccer (though a polo field is roughly the size of five soccer fields—300 yards long and 160 yards wide—the largest in organized sport). After a goal the teams switch direction and play towards the other goal. The team that scores the most goals wins.

Like golf, a handicap system exists in polo as a way to ensure that teams with players of varied abilities are more evenly matched. Spectators should be aware of any handicap difference prior to the start of play.

Matches are divided in chukkas (or chukkers), with each chukka lasting seven minutes. Teams consist of four players and each player can use as many ponies as they want during a match. At the end of each chukka most players change ponies but sometimes players switch during a chukka. Games are generally between four and six chukkas.

Two umpires control the game and there is a third official in the clubhouse to make the final decision if there is a disagreement. Umpires call fouls when a player takes another player’s line. In polo, a player following the ball has the right of way and any player who crosses

that right of way close enough to be dangerous commits a foul. These fouls vary in degrees of danger so the umpires will award free hits at different distances to reflect the seriousness of the foul. Players are allowed to hook an opponent’s stick and to “ride off” an opponent traveling in the same direction, but rough or dangerous play is not permitted.



renewed interest in this age-old game by a fresh, young generation of players. In fact, this interest from new and younger players has increased club membership on both islands to an all time high, and the desire to play better quality polo has seen an influx of high handicap professional players along with many visiting international teams from the UK, USA, Canada, South Africa, India, Mexico, Argentina and Australia.

### Costa Rica

As in Jamaica and Barbados, it was the English who brought polo to Costa Rica more than a century ago when they came to build the railroads, and the game has a long history in the country's Central Valley. Today, around thirty-five regular polo players call Costa Rica home, and with the arrival of the Argentines and the construction of the beautiful Ellerstina complex, there is little doubt that polo's popularity—amongst locals and visitors—is guaranteed to continue its growth trajectory.

At the Ellerstina Costa Rica Polo and Equestrian Beach Club just north of the Papagayo Peninsula, visitors can experience beachfront polo in an unrivaled Caribbean setting. Associated with the famed Ellerstina Polo Club in Argentina, Ellerstina Costa Rica is frequented by Argentine polo superstars during the eight months of annual open play. With 2,500 acres stretched along 2½ miles of Carbonal Bay beach, Ellerstina features two impeccable board-ringed playing fields with picturesque palm-thatched rancho-style stands, and exquisitely-designed barn and stables.

Along with Ellerstina, The Los Reyes Polo Club in Alajuela—one of Costa Rica's older polo establishments—welcomes visitors to their regular Saturday and Sunday matches beginning at noon throughout the season.

### CONTACTS

#### Holder's Hill

St. James, Barbados  
(246) 432 1802  
*clubmanager@barbadospoloclub.com*  
*www.barbadospoloclub.com*

#### Waterhall Polo Stables

St. James, Barbados  
(246) 262 3282  
*waterhallpolo@sunbeach.net*  
*www.waterhallpolo.com*

#### Chukka Cove Polo Club

St. Ann, Jamaica  
(876) 972 2506  
*info@chukkacove.com*

#### Knolford Polo Ranch

Kingston, Jamaica  
(876) 929 5462  
*knolford@yahoo.com*  
*www.knolford.com*



## SCHEDULES, ETIQUETTE, ETC.



Polo season in the islands runs from November/December to May, and medium-goal polo tournaments are scheduled at the big polo clubs most weeks throughout the season making it fairly easy for visitors to catch a game. In Costa Rica, the season at Ellerstina runs from January to the end of April with games taking place on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays.

The 14-goal Colombian Emeralds Barbados Open—hailed as the catalyst for the remarkable revival of polo in the islands—usually takes place the first or second week in March and always draws a big international crowd. The Barbados International Polo Challenge held in February at Lion's Castle in St. Thomas, is another good bet for taking in some high-quality action, along with the annual "Battle of the Sexes" (dates vary). Established in 2003, this popular tournament pits leading female players from around the world against their male counterparts in a highly-charged encounter.

While there's no need to spend hundreds of dollars shopping for a Pretty Woman-esque outfit to wear to a game, because polo matches tend to attract a very high quality of spectators, visitors should adhere to a smart but casual dress code when attending a match or tournament.

Nothing fancy, but jeans and swimwear are usually considered no-no's.

If you'd like a chance to get in the game—or at least learn the basics—there are a number of polo stables throughout the islands that offer both private lessons and clinics. In Jamaica, private polo lessons and clinics are available at the St. Ann Polo Club & Equestrian Centre, Knolford Polo Ranch and Chukka Cove in Ocho Rios. In Barbados, visitors should contact Vicki Gonzales, the club manager at Holder's Hill, for information on clinics, game schedules, or to schedule a lesson at one of the stables.

