

Pirates of the Caribbean

From cunning buccaneer Henry Morgan to swashbuckling Black Bart, Carla Passino retraces the history of the region's most notorious seamen



Bring me that horizon: the Caribbean waters no longer run red with blood, but the romance of Jack Sparrow (*facing page*) remains

WHEN Jack Sparrow stepped off his sinking boat on a balmy morning in 1720, setting off the chain of events that would lead to love, the removal of an ancient curse and cinematic piracy's greatest success, the golden age of Caribbean raiders was almost coming to an end. As Commodore Norrington tries to do in the film, the Royal Navy was patrolling the West Indies to stamp out the pirates that threatened Britain's lucrative maritime trade. It hadn't always been like that, however. Less than 60 years earlier, British governors had been harnessing buccaneers to attack Spanish ships and settlements.

Men with a taste for adventure (or nothing to lose) had been flocking to the West Indies since the 1500s. By the early 17th century, part of the island of Hispaniola (today's Haiti and Dominican Republic) was home to a group of hunters who smoked their meat on a frame called *boucan*—and so it was that some of the most savage men ever to cross the sea ended up being named after a humble cooking tool.

Over time, the buccaneers moved to turtle-shaped Tortuga (and, later, Jamaica), embracing piracy after the Spanish attacked them and killed their cattle. Since then, many cultivated an almost personal vendetta against Spain and this presented a great opportunity for the English: they could conveniently inflict serious damage on an enemy country almost without firing a single shot of their own. Letters of marque were swiftly issued, giving the pirates a veneer of privateer respectability.

This didn't make them any less ferocious: when Welshman Henry Morgan assaulted the city of Porto Bello in 1668, he came up with a plan that was as cunning as it was ruthless. The settlement was defended by mighty fortresses and the buccaneers only numbered 400. Undeterred, Morgan had huge ladders built and forced the city's nuns and monks to set them against the fort's walls. Caught between the pirates and Porto Bello's own governor, who was presumably not afraid of God's wrath and 'spared them as little as he had the raiders', the brothers and sisters were slaughtered—

but, by then, the ladders had been put in place, 'the buccaneers immediately swarmed up' and the fort fell, according to Alexander Exquemelin's *Buccaneers of America*.

Porto Bello was but the start of Morgan's career. He harried the Venezuelan cities of Maracaibo and Gibraltar before embarking on his boldest raid: Panama. Landing at the northern end of the isthmus, he led his men up the Chagres river, across thick forests and deadly swamps, to reach Old Panama City in the south. There, he took the Spanish army by surprise, forcing them to abandon their position and march—straight into his firing line. It was a complete rout, but finding that the governor had fled with most of Panama's wealth, Morgan torched it to the ground.

For diplomatic reasons, Charles II could not be seen to condone the raid, so Morgan was arrested and sent back to London. But the King, who had profited handsomely from the privateer's ventures, soon honoured him with a baronetcy and sent him back to Jamaica to be the island's Deputy Governor. Perhaps

his new position required him to polish up his image, because, in 1684, he sued the publishers of *Buccaneers of America*, as he didn't like how he had been portrayed in the book.

If Morgan tried hard to maintain his reputation, Bristol-born Edward Teach, or Blackbeard, did his best to blacken it, even cultivating a particularly fearsome look. In his *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*, Charles Johnson described him as having 'a large Quantity of Hair, which, like a frightful Meteor, covered his whole Face... This Beard was black, which he suffered to grow of an extravagant Length... it came up to his Eyes'.

Blackbeard took the pardon, but boredom must have gnawed: he turned rogue again

Less than 50 years separate Blackbeard's rise from Morgan's, but much had changed. With Spain's influence waning, England consolidated its grip on the colonies and governors cracked down on unruly buccaneers. English pirates found refuge in New Providence on the Bahamas and, although many stuck only to plundering French or Spanish ships, Teach had no such qualms, attacking any appetising vessel that had the misfortune to cross his path, including a large number that he captured in a very short time in May 1718 off Charles Town, in South Carolina.

By then however, George I had had enough of pirates and, in a masterstroke, offered a pardon to anyone willing to give up cutlass and pistol. He sent Woodes Roger, a former privateer (and the man who had rescued the original Robinson Crusoe, Alexander Selkirk, from Juan Fernández Island), to govern the Bahamas and hunt down those who would refuse his offer.

Blackbeard himself took the pardon and retired to a plantation, but boredom must have gnawed at him: he returned to the sea as a privateer, then gave up all pretence and turned rogue again. He delighted in pillaging ships up and down the Ocracoke inlet, until traders and landowners asked the governor of Virginia for help. He sent two sloops under the command of

Lt Robert Maynard, who engaged in battle with Blackbeard on the morning of November 22, 1718. They fought 'till the Sea was tintur'd with Blood' and Blackbeard was still cocking his pistol when he dropped dead. 'Here was an End of that courageous Brute, who might have pass'd in the World for a Heroe, had he been employ'd in a good Cause'.

Less glorious was the end of another renegade, 'Calico' Jack Rackham, two years later. Having captured a few sloops, he and his crew headed for Jamaica, where they took the ill-fated decision to drop anchor and imbibe some celebratory punch. They were entirely helpless when a pirate-hunter found them and boarded their ship. Only two crewmembers put up some resistance and they both turned out to be women—Anne Bonny and Mary Read. Bonny was Rackham's lover, but that didn't prevent her from giving him a damning epitaph: 'If he had fought like a Man, he need not have been hang'd like a Dog.'

By then, hundreds of Royal Navy ships policed the Caribbean and only a few notorious pirates remained: Londoner Edward Low, as fond of torturing and killing as he was of plundering, and Welshman Bartholomew Roberts. Known as Black Bart, he was every inch the swashbuckling pirate: according to Johnson, he faced a man-of-war 'dressed in a rich crimson Damask Wastcoat and Breeches, a red Feather in his Hat, a Gold Chain round his Neck, with a Diamond Cross hanging to it, a Sword in his Hand, and two Pair of Pistols hanging at the End of a Silk Sling'.

Sailing from Newfoundland to Brazil and on to West Africa, he captured more than 400 vessels. A merchant seaman, he had turned to piracy to better his lot in life: 'In an honest Service,' Johnson reported him saying, 'there is thin Commons, low Wages, and hard Labour; in this, Plenty and Satiety, Pleasure and Ease, Liberty and Power; and who would not ballance Creditor on this Side, when all the Hazard that is run for it, at worst, is only a sour Look at choaking. No, A merry Life and a short one, shall be my Motto.'

He had his wish granted, dying aged 39, in battle, but unvanquished: his crew 'threw him over-board, with his Arms and Ornaments on, according to the repeated Request he made'. Roberts was killed on February 10, 1722, and with him died the Golden Age of Pirates. Unless, of course, you count Capt Jack Sparrow. 🏴‍☠️



Live in the Caribbean

Plenty of pirate festivals and tours add to the region's charm, making it the perfect place to escape the winter blues

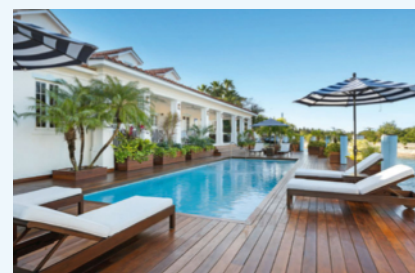
Barbados

Set next to the Royal Westmoreland golf course, five-bedroom Seaduced has an open-plan living and dining area that flows onto a covered terrace with a spectacular pool beyond. \$5.2 million (£3.8m), Realtors Limited (00 12 46 537 6946)



Bahamas

Perfect for entertaining, this magnificent house has four bedrooms, a swimming pool and 1,000sq ft of covered terracing overlooking an Old Fort Bay canal. \$3.8 million (£2.78m), Knight Frank (020-7861 1553)



Jamaica

Built in the 18th-century and later home to Lord Brownlow, one of the Duke of Windsor's friends, five-bedroom Sussex was the first house in Jamaica to have a telephone line installed. \$2.95 million (£2.087m), Coldwell Banker Jamaica Realty 00 18 76 403 7483 or 00 18 76 521 4826)

