

Caribbean, Callaloo, Chocolate and Charm

EDITORIAL AND PHOTOS BY TERENCE BAKER

The farther south you travel toward South America, the more the isles of the Caribbean reveal lush interiors and mountainous topographies. Cases in point are the island-nations of St. Lucia and Grenada. Both possess memorable countryside, rich indigenous cultures, spectacular beaches and nicknames that bespeak paradise—Helen of the West, for St. Lucia, supposedly a comparison of its beauty to that of Helen of Troy, and Spice Island, for Grenada, a nod to its nutmeg and other tasty delights.



► St. Lucia

Above all, experience three St. Lucian things: the lengthy poem, *Omeros*, by the island's Nobel laureate in literature, Derek Walcott; callaloo, a thick soup made from amaranth leaves; and the majesty of the Pitons, two adjacent mountains, of which Walcott waxes lyrical.

Now recovered from 2010's Hurricane Tomas (the odd mud slide might still be seen), this beautiful island is again ready to receive gasps of wonder. The island's symbol is those two Piton mountains, Gros and Petit, calling tourists—including me—for decades with stunning vistas. Rising above a Caribbean sea colored turquoise and cobalt, they draw people toward, around and (get an early start) up them. I'd recommend climbing Petit, which despite being ever so slightly shorter, hence the name, appears larger, if only because most people approach the two peaks along the twisting road (an adventure in itself) to Sofrière from the capital, Castries.

Holland America is one cruise line that drops passengers off in Castries in the morning and, if so chosen, picks them up in Sofrière in the afternoon, thus allowing passengers two or three more land hours. Sofrière is small, enjoyable to stroll around and the childhood home of Napoleon Bonaparte's first wife. Its Sulphur Springs clearly shows the island's volcanic power, as does Diamond Estate's waterfall of milky-grey water. An easier activity is floating on your back off any beach, watching the clouds pass over Gros or Petit Piton.

Upscale resorts include Anse Chastanet, Jade Mountain and Jalousie Plantation Sugar Beach (the last hotel to reopen following the hurricane), all staring at the Pitons, which, I swear, it is possible to gaze at all day. All-inclusive choices include three Sandals resorts, all north of Castries and providing Pitons tours. Give half a day to Lushan Country Life, an attraction where birds, herbs, flowers and country ways meld to reveal St. Lucia's rich heritage.

English is spoken, but locals chat in French Creole *patois*, a language that dances.

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► Grenada

Farther south is another blessed isle, English-speaking Grenada, famed for spices, despite 2004's Hurricane Ivan destroying many nutmeg trees (both islands by the law of averages have to be spared from disasters for many decades, I hope). I saw nutmeg in Grand Etang National Park, where guiding me was Telfor Bedeau, in his eighth decade but appearing as spry as a 30-year-old (he celebrated his 71st birthday by climbing Grenada's highest mountain, a volcano called St. Catherine, all 2,757 feet *twice* in the same day). We took an easier route to the base of a series of cascades, the Seven Sisters waterfalls, which the adventurous climb and jump off in sequence. Others swim in a natural pool.

Memories of Grenada's 1983 invasion are all over the isle, as are curbs, walls and houses in the national colors of red, green and yellow. In the capital, St. George's, an attractive place wrapped around a harbor, a climb to Fort George, built in 1706, reveals great views and the spot where former prime minister Maurice Bishop was executed.

Better memories will stem from Grenada's beaches, food and rum. GrandAnse beach is the most famous, but nearby Mourne Rouge is more stunning, and you might just have it to yourself. Two wonderful hotels are Flamboyant, with access to Grand Anse, and Kalinago, right on Mourne Rouge. Plan a visit to Dougaldston Estate, where spices and cocoa are prepared and expert commentary by another fascinating senior Grenadian, Clifford Bridgeman, is offered; to Grenada Chocolate Company, producing delicious morsels in a space so small, employees need to slide by one another; and to River Antoine distillery, where everything looks unchanged since it first made rum in 1785, or thereabouts.

A stimulating cultural end to your two-island trip is at Patrick's, at the edge of St. George's. Little more than a shack, visitors sit outside while owner Karen dishes up plate after plate of whatever indigenous recipes she decides upon that evening, followed, for the brave, by her own rum cocktail.

It's all in the spirit of adventure, which you'll find St. Lucia and Grenada provide aplenty. 

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