

Edible & Indelible St. Lucia

Known for its volcanic beaches,
shipwreck diving, kite-surfing and opulent resorts

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JULES TORTI

When the plane lands in Saint Lucia, it's like walking off the tarmac into an enviable Instagram account.

It's verdant with mammoth ferns and swaths of rainforest. The iconic twin Pitons (Gros and Petit Piton) create an island backdrop like no other. Serpentine roads (paved even!) wiggle through hillside villages that pay no attention to muted palettes. Every house competes with the neighbouring one in blasts of flamingo pink, Easter egg green and margarine yellow. In the bowls of the foothills, red steel-roofed and periwinkle homes appear like a flow of lava to the lower valley. At night, the orange twinkle of that flow is mesmerizing.

All the words of my preferred lexicon come into play when I talk about the Eastern Caribbean Island known for its volcanic beaches, shipwreck diving, kite-surfing and opulent resorts. Drowsy, halcyon days spent at Rodney Bay are serenaded by syrupy sunsets. Part of the Lesser Antilles chain, the isle sits between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, south of Martinique and north of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Bragging rights abound, but locals and visitors alike love the “natural air conditioning” from the Atlantic headwaters. From November to February, the average daytime high is 27 C with favourable 21 C nights.

Saint Lucia is a rainbow showcase — I counted more rainbows in two weeks on the island than I have in my entire life. If rain does fall, it's momentary, a two- to four-minute release from the skies and the front moves on and out. Mangoes actually fall more frequently than rain here, and if you travel during March you will be privy to the irresistible candy sweetness at every turn.

Whether you are a starry-eyed honeymooner, seasoned cruiser or a purveyor of seriously good food, Saint Lucia beckons. The five-hour direct flight from Toronto makes Saint Lucia a strong contender in a growing list of easily accessible sun destinations such as Cuba, Dominican, Mexico and Aruba. But, finding last-minute accommodations can be daunting. There are several all-inclusive properties but, with the influx of Airbnb listings and more intimate boutique condos,

The view from a castle in Vieux Fort, in the southern portion of this Caribbean paradise.



ABOVE: The infamous 'Fruit Boat' on Reduit Beach in Rodney Bay.



RIGHT: Castries market is a sensory thrill of grilled dorado, daredevil hot sauces, cactus pears, knobs of turmeric and otherworldly root vegetables.

my partner and I wanted a more independent experience.

However, we looked at The Body-Holiday in Cap Estate and its Caribblue bay penthouse for pure fun. With a private Turkish Hammam steam room with marble and travertine mosaic and a heated massage table, it is priced at \$3,200 per person, per week price tag (flight not included). The Ayurvedic menu option is in tune with holistic healing, mind, body, spirit, the five elements and six tastes. However, we were thinking more along the lines of food trucks and rum shacks. And for the BodyHoliday budget, we could go on safari in Botswana for two months.

Coincidentally, we found vacancy at a

tony property owned by a hot sauce, bakery and real estate baron, Bonnie Zephirin.

The townhouse-style apartments at Top of the World in Marisule are just one of her successful enterprises. The units are palatial and kitted out with stocked kitchenettes, a massive master bedroom and a serene pool shaded by a monster mango tree. There's not a single blade of grass or bougainvillea bloom out of place here. It's like appearing in the screensaver on your laptop — the place you didn't fathom you'd ever be able to see for yourself, with a punchy rum in hand.

A seventh-generation Caribbean with a long tap root to Ireland, Bonnie is a firecracker (and if you want fire, try her

Viking hot sauce lineup). She is focused on her empire like a marksman, but still has time for charisma and "social work." She quickly corrected herself in conversation, "I mean, socializing." A true ambassador of Saint Lucia, Bonnie spouts off island history and her entrepreneurial visions — all while navigating kamikaze Castries traffic. Her nifty driving skill can only be island-honed, but she could be a New York cabbie without a heart palpitation.

I know, whenever someone goes south, the feedback is always about the islanders being so friendly. It doesn't matter what Caribbean island you mention, everyone will attest to the lovely locals. But Saint Lucia wins.

We had so many animated chats with fishermen, cabbies and amateur rum mixologists. In a non-descript, unmarked lime green roadside shack, we gabbed to "Granddad" while his daughter prepped salt codfish and green figs (salt cod, boiled unripe bananas, mayonnaise and cucumber) in a Tupperware bowl big enough to bathe a baby.

The menu was on a simple chalkboard and ever-changing. Five offerings we enquired about were either sold out (no pigtails, no tuna and corn-topped pizza) or only available on Friday or "when it is dark." We learned about "bake bakes," which are like "bakes" but baked and not fried. Bakes (fry bread) are also called loaf and split like buns to be filled with salt cod.

Granddad entertained us while we waited for pieces of fried chicken and mac 'n' cheese pie to be wrapped in foil. He told us about his time in Toronto, at Caribana in 1990. And how much he loved Gander. Gander, Newfoundland? Yes. His blue eyes teared as he recalled the fog, the moose and . . . the friendly locals.

At Reduit Beach in Rodney Bay, we had spontaneous philosophy classes with Ephram, the "Bird Man" who preferred to be called "Iha." He explained that Iha is Creole and means I am with everyone, I am with you. "I used to be 'Bird Man' of the beach when I sold hummingbirds and little fish carved out of coco," he said. "But

now I am Iha, and I have my own business, renting umbrellas and chairs. This is my office! You jealous?"

At Stefano's Pizza we grabbed cracker-thin crust pizza slices, brushed with olive oil and laced with fresh oregano. As we waited for our order, Stefano himself leaned on the counter with floured hands and told us about his previous career in Italy as a government worker. He visited in 2005 for the first time, and every year since until he retired and moved to Rodney Bay two years ago. He opened his pizza shop and walked headlong into his dream.

We learned how to filet tilapia from a sinewy man with waist-length dreads near Choc (pronounced "shock") beach. We learned how to make ginger sugar popcorn in a kettle in a tiny store perfumed with ripe guava fruit. Brenda, who worked at the rum punch shack at Sabrina's Place told us about her New Jersey life and the big motorcycle tattoo on her deltoid. "It's for my son. He died on this bike, and he loved to travel. I came here for him. He's with me. This would be his favourite place."

Lincoln, with dreads piled high in a colourful sock, told us the history of the infamous Fruit Boat that putters along the shore of Reduit. When the ramshackle vessel roars in from across the bay, you half expect Tom Hanks' Castaway character to emerge. With faded flags of the world as an exterior, the floating vendor toots his comical horn and begins shouting, "Mangoes! Papaya! Pina! Coco!" Buyers must swim out a little with wadded up East Caribbean dollars held high to see his wares. With another toot, he's off.

This is the best way to shop. The beaches of Saint Lucia are the fastest place to load up — easier than online shopping carts, even. I started documenting all the mobile items for sale: green coconut water (tops neatly hacked off with a machete in front of you, for the freshest possible experience), cigarettes, cigars, conch shells, massages, aloe vera from the "Beach Doctor" who insisted it cured all. "For your mosquito bites (which remarkably, we had none) and sunburns" (which we had some). There

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were offers of beef roti, pelican carvings and a polite request for money to buy tennis balls for local children.

But, whatever your persuasion, you can shop in neon-lit supermarkets too. Though we always lean towards partaking in the local beer and rum cocktails, the duty-free stores in Castries and Rodney Bay carry Apothic wines, Guinness and all the usual suspects. Grocery store shelves are loaded with the familiar too: jalapeno Havarti, pate, soya milk and Lays chips, right down to Hooters chicken wing sauce, if that's what you want.

Regardless, a trip to the Castries market (touted as one of the Top 10 must-see markets by National Geographic) is necessary for the sensory thrill of grilled dorado, more daredevil hot sauces, cactus pears, knobs of turmeric and otherworldly root vegetables like cassava and taro. I wished that beet root pickles, Irish moss shakes and pumpkin salsa were safer to tote back in checked luggage to Canada.

The market is like a rabbit's warren with tidy displays of nutmeg, linseed, mace and plug of wrapped cacao. There are bottles filled with all the herbal vitals for making your own spiced rum. Warty gourds the size of toddlers are piled next to huge bundles of cinnamon bark that looks more like kindling than our skinny, tightly rolled tubes. And, if the simmering goat and lamb curries don't tempt you in the cruise-ship headquarters, there's a safety net of Dominos, Subway and KFC.

As ardent food lovers, we wanted a destination that was delicious. This was it. Oil barrel grills along the main highway tease with the permeating spicy smoke plumes from jerk chicken breasts spitting on the grill.

All of Saint Lucia makes you breathe deeply. Somehow the fresh-mown grass smells identical to just-snipped cilantro. Walking (though not for the faint-hearted, it's like being on hamstring-curling incline on the treadmill) under fishbone cloud skies is the perfect equalizer for all the temptations. There's Creole lamb, curried



In St. Lucia, Marisule is the perfect place to catch a rainbow.

roti and golden empanadas.

A day at Reduit Beach is the best introduction to the island's foodie scene. You'll meet charismatic Yvonne, plying her moist banana gingerbread on the beach. She makes four pounds of it every night — and after the first day, you'll be on high alert for her wide smile and measured walk as she picks her way along the beach.

Lionfish derbies are routinely held, encouraging locals and tourists alike to eat the "enemy." Lionfish, startling and majestic to look at, eat ecologically sensitive species such as parrot fish that are essential for keeping algae at bay on the reefs. They also eat juvenile snapper and grouper like Pac Man. In just two years lionfish can decimate native prey populations by 65 to 95 per cent. If you're not feeling lionfish adventurous, blue marlin and mahi mahi are staples on the local menus.

Chocolate fiends will want to check out the "Tree to Bar" project in Soufriere at Boucan by Hotel Chocolat. You can learn about cocoa plantations, pod cultivation and the scourge of rats. Local farmers win here too as they are guaranteed generous

prices for their crop and assistance to go organic. For the Tree to Bar experience, participants grind cacao nibs, cacao butter and sugar in a hot mortar. Guests will admit to sweating a little for their chocolate for the mortar work involved. The magic concoctions are then poured into moulds, refrigerated and your very own custom chocolate bar is ready in 30 minutes.

Which begs the question? BodyHoliday Ayurvedic or Hotel Chocolat? Or, our twist: daily jerk chicken.

We set our mouths, throats and stomach lining on fire a few times. The Viking and Baron hot sauces with Scotch Bonnet peppers are like swallowing embers. Safer bets are the nutmeg banana ketchup and honey banana barbecue sauce.

If you really want to send your taste buds on a trip, try the Mauby elixir. Made from boiled bark, the iron-coloured juice is a tonic sweetened with sugar and nutmeg. But the aftertaste is as bitter as grapefruit pulp but Coca Cola sweet. Instead, don't miss the much raved-about coco tea. It's chalky sweet and more akin to hot cocoa twisted with perfumed spices than tea in my mind — but the locals drink it like an intravenous, at any time of day.

Other edible alerts: Sabrina's Place rum punch is like fuchsia gasoline in a plastic jug. Gloria B's bus conversion (ironically located at a main highway bus stop) in Marisule sells the best chicken roti (we did the unofficial two-week-long taste test). "Ginger Rogers" will be your nightcap of choice: Mix Royalty ginger beer and a swirl of the local honey-coloured Bounty rum, on the rocks.

There's so much to eat here: sweet and sour tamarind rolled in sugar, lambi (conch) fritters, soursops, bowling ball-sized grapefruits, souse (pork legs) and "local provisions" (dasheen, plantains, rice, dahl and mac 'n' cheese pie and/or spaghetti and greens, all of which accompany any take-away dish of Creole lamb or turkey or fish).

Our only disappointment was that we missed avocado season. Guess we'll have to go back. 🍷

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