

Adventure playground

There's more to Saint Lucia than its beaches, as Qin Xie discovers on the tourist board's first agent fam trip since the pandemic

As I stroll to the raised yoga pavilion for an early morning stretch, I can see why most of the guests here at East Winds, one of Saint Lucia's most popular hotels, are repeat customers.

Petite cottages are interspersed with extra-wide hammocks swaying in the gentle breeze, while a well-manicured garden provides a green backdrop. The sun has just returned after a tropical downpour and everything is peaceful and quiet. As I lie down on the yoga mat, I feel I could easily drift off to sleep.

There's no time for that, though. I'm on Saint Lucia Tourism

Authority's first agent fam trip since the pandemic to explore what the island has to offer in the way of adventure experiences, which are a big focus for the tourist board this year.

In the popular north of the island, you can ride horses along Cas-en-Bas beach, which hugs the rugged Atlantic shore to the east, or head inland for ziplining over the rainforest at Castries Water Works Reserve.

WATER WONDERS

For someone who loves getting out on the water like me, most of the action is based around Rodney Bay and Gros Islet. Sailing and snorkelling >

Zipline at Mome
Coubaril Historical
Adventure Park

PHOTO: Kenneth Taylor

DESTINATIONS

ACTIVE & ADVENTURE HOLIDAYS | SAINT LUCIA

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MORE
HOTELS

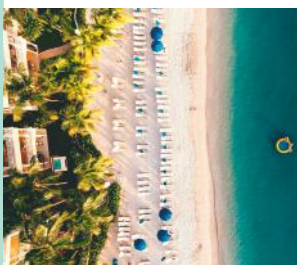
Soco House: All decked out in white and lapis lazuli blue, the boutique adult-only Soco House is a new opening that brings South Beach vibes to the lively hub of Rodney Bay. Rooms from £284 a night all-inclusive.
thesocohotel.com/soco-house



BodyHoliday: For those who just can't relax, BodyHoliday has a packed activities programme that includes daily massages. It's a great option for solo travellers too, with communal tables and no single supplement. Rooms from \$385 a night all-inclusive.
thebodyholiday.com



The Landings: Sail in to stay at The Landings, which has its own marina. Food here is seriously good and you can catch a free ferry to dinner if you don't fancy the short walk. From £400 a night B&B.
landingsstlucia.com



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Yoga session, Stonefield Villa Resort; zipline, Morne Coubaril Historical Adventure Park; horse riding; and snuba diving **PICTURES:** Saint Lucia Tourism Authority, Kenneth Taylor; Irving de Jong



are the obvious options, but it's 'snuba' diving that catches my eye. On a quiet beach on Pigeon Island, a military base turned national park in Gros Islet, I meet Anthony Leonce, the founder of Sealife Paradise and self-declared 'Snubaman'. With over 20 years' experience as a diver, he now runs snuba tours here several times a day.

He tells me snuba is a cross between scuba diving and snorkelling. Like scuba diving, you can get deep beneath the waves to mingle with the fishes. But it's a lot less complicated because the tank floats on the surface and you don't have to fiddle with a buoyancy control device.

As a Padi-certified diver, I find being weighed down without a buoyancy aid quite unsettling – and if I'm honest, a little terrifying – so at first I just hover near the surface. But when Anthony goes to hand me a sea urchin and I struggle to

swim down towards him, I suddenly realise that, even with a weight belt, I'm not sinking. That puts my mind at ease to actually explore.

As I swim over seagrass meadows and approach the corals, I spot clusters of colourful fish darting in and out of crevices. Then a menacing-looking moray eel lurking in the shadows stops me in my tracks, and I edge to the surface again.

Anthony also runs Sea Trek from the same spot. This is a form of diving

where you wear a weighted helmet over your head and air is constantly pumped through it, allowing divers to just breathe normally.

The helmet feels crushingly heavy near the surface but, as you walk, the weight is lifted by the salty seawater so you start to feel floaty. In fact, the best way to get around is to hop along the seabed – it's as close to being an astronaut as you can get and it's a lot of fun. I find it much easier to get to grips with; you don't need to know how to swim and your hair doesn't even get wet.

With fresh confidence, I bounce around a new underwater installation that Anthony has set up. It showcases celebrated Saint Lucians from history and comes with a handful of photo opportunities, such as a car, and a dining table and chairs. I can't say I've been anywhere else where a fish tries to nibble the typewriter I'm pretending to use. ➤

top tip

For a break between adventures, try chocolate-making at Howelton Estate



ABOVE: A Segway tour is an exhilarating way to explore Saint Lucia

SEGWAY TO GO

Back on dry land, I also try my hand at riding a Segway for the first time. Keys and Thomas, guides with the Rodney Bay-based Lucian Style Experiences, talk me through the balancing act in a field just opposite their office before we set off on a private trail up Mount Pimard.

As I zip up the rocky path, wind in my hair, the treeline gives way to sweeping views of golden beaches and Pigeon Island in the distance. Farther up, I even catch a glimpse of a Piton in the distance. With temperatures in the 30s during the day, I'm not ashamed to say I'd pick this over hiking any day.

On the way back, we ramp up the speed for an exhilarating race down, with a cold beer awaiting us at Marie's bar on the beach. As I slug down a refreshing lager, a cool breeze blows in from the shore; I couldn't be happier.

And this is how Saint Lucia catches your attention – the tiny moments of perfection that make you want to come back again and again. **TW**

Agents' VIEWS



"As an avid scuba diver, I've been fortunate enough to explore many Caribbean islands and Saint Lucia is certainly up there with the best. Superman's Flight and Fairyland are two of my favourite dive sites; there's an abundance of corals and marine life – it's truly magical."

Adam Patchton,
franchise owner, Not Just Travel



"Saint Lucia is my bestselling honeymoon destination and it's easy to see why. It offers more diversity: there are tropical rainforests, dramatic mountain peaks and beautiful beaches. I am a real foodie too, and it did not disappoint."

Gayle Chase,
gold travel counsellor, Travel Counsellors



"Villas in Saint Lucia are reasonably priced compared with other Caribbean destinations so that gives it a competitive advantage. You can choose beachfront or magnificently high viewpoints, and most have dedicated property managers to make your stay unforgettable."

Luis Aviles,
villa specialist and concierge, Exceptional Villas

NEED TO KNOW

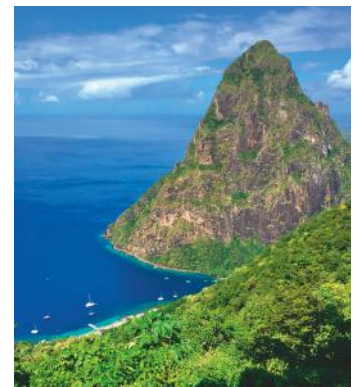
✿ Saint Lucia has removed its pre-travel testing and vaccination requirements for visitors, effective from last week. All travellers must still fill in a health screening form.

✿ British Airways has daily flights to Saint Lucia while Virgin Atlantic operates a winter seasonal service three times a week. The journey time is just under nine hours.

✿ The official currency is the Eastern Caribbean dollar but US dollars are also widely accepted.

✿ Temperatures are about the same year-round: low 30s during the day and low 20s at night.

✿ Cruise ships dock at Castries in the north, where there are more-affordable hotels. The most exclusive properties are in the southwest, around Soufriere and the Pitons (pictured).



BOOK IT

Caribtours offers seven nights' all-inclusive at East Winds from £2,749 per person sharing a Superior Cottage between June 1 and October 31, 2023. It includes BA flights from Gatwick with UK lounge access. caribtours.co.uk