

A taste of paradise

Laura French heads to Saint Lucia to sample its natural charms

@laurafrench121

It's hard not to fall for Saint Lucia. Everything here is fresh - mangoes straight from the tree, cinnamon straight from the bark, fish straight from the sea. You can smell it, feel it, taste it.

Just as powerful are the landscapes - verdant jungles flanking volcanic beaches, bright green palms edging cobalt waters, jets of steam bursting out from bubbling craters.

After just a few days spent at the iconic Jade Mountain resort I was fully seduced, accustomed to waking up in front of the Pitons and a mirror-flat stretch of blue every morning, as the birds chattered away and the trees rustled with a warm, tropical breeze. Here are my highlights from the west of the island.

► GO DIVING

It's a known fact that Saint Lucia offers some of the best diving in the Caribbean, with everything from dramatic drop-offs to sponge-covered shipwrecks to entice serious divers as well as complete beginners.

The diving school at Anse Chastanet can take qualified divers (including non-guests) out to all of them - including Anse la Raye, the Piton Wall and Turtle Reef - and offers intro sessions as well as Padi courses.

I embarked on a night dive and it was spectacular - think coral speckled with luminescent green, fish shimmering fluorescent blue and water glowing psychedelic purple under our UV light so that it looked like some sort of

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I embarked on a night dive and it was spectacular - think coral speckled with luminescent green

underwater disco (I imagine this is how Nemo lets his hair down).

Even without the UV light it was spectacular, with lobsters, lionfish, parrotfish and turtles gliding among mustard-yellow tube sponges and burgundy clumps of coral, providing an intriguing glimpse into how this universe changes come twilight.

► TAKE A HIKE

Saint Lucia's lush, rainforest-clad landscapes make the island a dream for hikers, and among its most talked-about trails is the climb up Gros Piton (the larger of the two mountains), which I decided to tackle.

This steep, rocky trail meanders through a long stretch of damp, shady rainforest opening out at various points with scenic lookouts.

It's fairly strenuous and slippery at times, so clients need a good level of fitness, but those who make it to the peak are rewarded with glorious views - a vast stretch of opal peeping through the trees, clouds floating around you in a sea of mist. It takes four to five



PICTURES: NORBERT PROBST, BERND RAC/ANSE CHASTANET



FAR LEFT:
Scuba diving

LEFT:
Jungle biking

BELOW:
Jade Mountain



Caribtours offers seven nights' all-inclusive at Jade Mountain from £3,859, based on two sharing a Sky Jacuzzi Suite. Price includes return flights, lounge access and private transfers, for travel between January 4 and December 21, 2019. caribtours.co.uk

➔ hours round-trip and can be booked at the resort for \$85.

But for a significantly easier walk with equally impressive lookouts, there's the Tet Paul Nature Trail. It's a gently sloped, 45-minute hike past rolling farms, banana plantations and pineapple trees, with views of the surrounding beaches and towering Pitons along the way. The walk can be done independently or booked through the resort for \$50.

▶ VISIT DIAMOND FALLS BOTANICAL GARDEN

Just as rich on the nature front is Diamond Falls Botanical Garden, a six-acre stretch of green boasting an array of colourful flora, alongside a 17-metre-high waterfall tumbling down from the Diamond River above. Sulphur, magnesium and other

minerals have turned the rockface behind it a rainbow blend of orange, purple, copper and yellow, making its iridescent plume the crowning centrepiece of the park.

There's also a nature trail where ferns, mahogany trees and red cedar hunch above a well-marked path, alongside three sulphur-heated thermal pools that were originally built in 1784 for King Louis XVI's French troops.

▶ BATHE AT THE SULPHUR SPRINGS

Sulphur Springs is the biggest attraction in Soufrière. Visitors from across the island come to glimpse this dormant volcano, which last erupted in the 1700s and now expresses itself through bouts of steam bursting from cracks in the rock, and pools of mud bubbling away under the pressure.

For the best way of experiencing it, suggest a tour to the mud baths. Guests are guided into a pool of warm, murky grey sludge, touted for its healing powers, before climbing to the top of the volcano to see this dramatic nature show from on high. Tours here with Anse Chastanet cost \$95, with a spa attendant on hand to offer mineral-rich mud treatments designed to rejuvenate and detoxify.

▶ EXPLORE THE ANSE MAMIN PLANTATION

There's plenty more in the way of nature. Just around the corner from Anse Chastanet, set on its own beach, sits Anse Mamin, a remote bay that looks like a clandestine cove cut off from the rest of the world. Despite its hideaway feel, it's open to the public as well as guests, and boasts an ➔



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→ open stretch of swimmable sea.

But the crowning glory here is the jungle that sits behind it. Set on a former 18th-century sugar plantation, it's now a lush rainforest, shaded by emerald-green palms and ancient cocoa trees, and filled with exotic spices and fruits (soursop, mangoes and coconuts to name a few).

Guide and self-proclaimed 'father nature' Meno takes you round to experience it through all the senses – from smelling lemongrass leaves to licking sour 'golden apples' – with insightful soundbites about the history of the plantation and the curative properties of its plants. Tours are complimentary.

'Jungle biking' tours are also available for those wanting to explore in a different way – think speeding up and down rocky, leafy hills, beneath the canopies, before reaching a reservoir that's totally deserted and peaceful (\$45 for guests at the resort).

▶ TRY A CHOCOLATE WORKSHOP

Saint Lucia knows how to do chocolate – there's even a Chocolate Heritage Month every August celebrating the island's cocoa-rich legacy.

Boutique hotel Boucan by Hotel Chocolat has its own cocoa plantation and offers various chocolate-related activities around it, while Jade Mountain owns the Emerald Estate – an organic farm nearby, home to more than 2,000 cocoa trees.

We took a tour of the farm to

✓ Tried & Tested

JADE MOUNTAIN RESORT AT ANSE CHASTANET

As soon as I walked into my Star Sanctuary at Jade Mountain I was blown away, with incredible views over the Pitons and an open stretch of ocean glaring out in front of me. The rooms have no fourth wall, meaning it's all totally open, and I quickly got used to the sounds of nature and warm breeze sending me to sleep in the evening.

There are 24 Sanctuaries, each with private infinity pools, as well as five Sky Jacuzzi Suites that have a whirlpool bath. Every room has a 'major domo' (a 24-hour butler who'll go out of their way to help you) and they're all creatively designed with a rustic, back-to-nature feel that isn't lavish or OTT.

The food is exceptional; Jade guests can eat at all of the restaurants on the wider Anse



Chastanet resort, as well as at Jade Mountain Club, where gourmet tasting menus fuse flavours together in extraordinary ways.

But the standout culinary experience for me was a private, castaway-style dinner at Anse Mamin beach, which saw us whizz

over on a speedboat before being served a six-course, lionfish-themed menu surrounded by candles and accompanied by violinists. This place is romance defined, and for those willing to splash the cash, it's an unforgettable experience.

Tested by Laura French

learn more about the process from bean to bar, tasting fleshy cacao fruits and roasted beans along the way before heading to the Chocolate Lab at the resort for a sense-overloading workshop.

The chocolatiers had us sampling various flavours before making our own creation to take home – picture a bucketful of molten lava-like chocolate trickling into moulds, with cinnamon, cashews, coconut

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I was smothered in warm, deliciously sweet oils so I left smelling like a freshly-baked brownie

and other ingredients fresh from the estate. The workshop costs \$75, and there's also a tasting experience available for free.

Chocolate cravings still not satisfied, I followed it up with an indulgent cocoa treatment at the spa (there's an entire chocolate menu), which saw me smothered in warm, deliciously sweet oils so I left smelling like a freshly-baked brownie. Now that's my kind of day, if ever there was one. **TV**



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