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BBEYOND MAGAZINE: 2011/3

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Dominica

From St Vincent I retrace my steps along the West Indian chain, decamping from urban Kingstown and Calliaqua to the nature island of Dominica. Pronounced with the stress on the last syllable, Dominica is an oddity for the Caribbean in that it is virtually unknown to most tourists. Its apparent anonymity is fortunate for those seeking the vast swathes of untouched rainforest and jungle that are fast disappearing across the world.

While the people are universally friendly and eager to help the helpless tourist, the urban areas lively and the dining excellent, it is Dominica's bursting ecologies and environments that make this essential to the island-hopper's tour. There are a plethora of nature-based activities in this land of perennial spring – as many, perhaps, as the number of untouched rainforests, waterfalls, mountain lakes and volcanic phenomena. Whether one chooses to climb the high mountains and valleys or dive to the depths, Dominica has it all; except for a zoo, due in part to a scarcity of large and dangerous critters.

The Trafalgar Falls, for example, is a twin cascade that spews out from the mountain tops and seems to fall from the clouds that float across the pale peaks. Descending the narrow path to the daughter fall is a rewarding but risky venture. There are the orange hot pools to bathe in, or if you feel daring enough, there are the torrents and hidden plunges of the daughter waterfall itself.

Finally, for the masochists and/or self styled explorers among our readers, there is the Boiling Lake Hike. This is a five hour hike at minimum and a good level of physical fitness is essential. Considering one's distance from the trail entrance, how long one stays at the various places of interest along the way and the recuperation time afterwards, it is more accurate to call it a day trip.

The hike takes you down to the floor of the jungle valleys, over river crossings and up to the ceiling of the sky. At the start of the hike, the mountains are still high above; by the end of the second leg one is looking down at those same mountains from the apex of a slightly taller mountain. The view reaches as far as Roseau on the coast and includes an ominous view of smoke floating out from the Boiling Lake (still hidden below), at times

enshrouding everything in thick sulphuric clouds. From there, you move carefully down the penultimate set of steps into a crimson valley, totally stained with iron sulphide. This slice of Mars on Earth is the only entrance – more aptly a scabble over some smooth rocks and what (at a distance) looks like a river of blood - into the Valley of Desolation.

Once you enter this noxious plain you are less likely to laugh at the name. The Valley looks like an impossible landscape of red rocks and yellow earth, charcoal and milky rivers, blackened vines and, finally, a barrage of hot steam, the last of which emerges from the vent-holes blasted out from the hell somewhere below. The rotten-egg smell of sulphur will increasingly inundate your lungs throughout the hike until it seems that you are breathing and living it. It takes on a less disgusting yet somehow more terrifying odour as you near the fumaroles, but it is the vision of the Boiling Lake itself that fills this writer with the greatest degree of despair.

Inside a large crater, supplied by a relatively inconspicuous waterfall, lies a vat of steam and sulphur stench. A small, flat area high above for safe viewing reminds one of our smallness when set against the raw power of the earth: were you to fall in, you would not only boil to death in mere moments but you would melt away into vapour.

The return journey is another gruelling two-and-a-half hour journey retracing one's initial steps to the Lake. The Titou Gorge, just at the entrance of the trail, is something I would definitely recommend leaving until after the hike. It can be a kind of temporary salve for the exhausted adventurer; floating along Titou's belly and gazing up the moulded walls and at the trees and sky is a blissful respite from the scorched Earth perils closer to the Lake itself.

Dominica is truly an underdeveloped garden of delights and wonders, waiting (with geological patience) for you to take the walk and discover them. Just as this writer feels that one's enjoyment of Dominica has to be a personalised undertaking, so too do the best places to stay offer an bespoke, exclusive experience. All three of BB's features were built and are run by private individuals, couples and families. As such, their luxury-class service is offered with a near-intimate level of charisma and flair for a very select number of guests. On that note, let me introduce...



Crescent Moon Cabins

Perched in a bright valley inside the Morne Trois Pitons national park, Crescent Moon Cabins is the ultimate realisation of people living in symbiotic harmony with the world around them. It is a working proof of the vitality that can be gleaned from Nature - if one knows what to look for.

Life at Crescent Moon is run by a family team of four - Ron and Jean, their daughter Tiana and her husband David. Through their own efforts and ingenuity they have created a retreat that would make most 'luxury' hotels and self-styled eco-resorts 'go green' (if you will excuse the pun) with envy. In this overgrown area of Dominica, physically

remote to the point of a near isolation, they have trusted to their own skills and expertise to reap a superior eco-experience for the benefit of their guests.

The cost of such an intimate relationship, both with our hosts and with the Dominican environment, is the kind of exclusivity that is oblivious to names or prestige. Just four cabins share a near-pristine view of the jungle valley, practically untouched save for the Crescent Moon site and a few neighbouring houses. Indeed, the artificial line between 'Man' and 'Nature', both an outcome and a necessity of Modernity, has become overgrown with entangling vines and forgotten in the blooming of a rainbow assortment of flowers. The cabins' structures use only locally

sourced hard woods, and are sparing in furnishings and ornaments in a way that evokes a rustic elegance.

Guests are submerged in the natural world that grows above, below and all around. On my first day I am treated to the sight of a flight of four hummingbirds (not the small ones that you find in one's garden, but the huge, tropical species) on a survey of the flowers hanging down from the rock face. Just a few metres from my door these fantastic birds fan by me, wings throbbing in my ears, to mesmerising effect. One night a tropical storm hit the island; suddenly the valley below lit up, as clear as day in a pale white flash, and the thunderous shockwaves reverberated all around in an awe-inspiring roar. The fogged night

glowed as a river of light streamed out from and into the darkness - usually across the horizon but occasionally from higher to lower clouds like luminescent tendrils. Throughout this magnificent yet violent display of natural power the nocturnal birds continued non-plussed, as unnerving (given the circumstances) bird-calls came out from the left and right, above and below.

The Crescent Moon Cabins is ideally located near some of Dominica's best sites. It is truly an eco-lodge in that the entire experience - whether it is from the site itself or taking advantage of the trails in the National Park - is completely organic. Between each of the Viveralli family members, Crescent Moon is managed so that it is almost entirely self-sufficient and environmentally sustainable: only the staple crops are from outside the Morne Trois Piton region, with the vegetables being produced - and animals raised - organically on-site or being traded in from local farmers. Even the soaps are made from cinnamon and plant oils distilled on-site (and they are much better for it).

Ron is the consummate chef who can cook a three course meal with far greater finesse than many metropolitan chefs and their lackey-armies can achieve with a single plate. It is not just that he has a superior supply, or that he is using produce and spices that are native to the region, it is very much down to his own flair and training too. The results of his endeavours manifest themselves during expectant evenings while one greedily awaits the next plate - always a surprise in the absence of a menu. The sautéed pineapple cheesecake has to have been one of the best desserts I have had in a very long time - despite the fact that, under normal circumstances, cooked pineapple is one of my pet hates - for the cinnamon-infused flavour that explodes and drips from the pineapple slices like golden nectar. The goat's cheese risotto with Portobello mushrooms (and a glass of smooth red wine) spirits me away to the Ligurian coast, or wherever one imagines the pinnacle of Italian dining to be, while the night songs of the birds and the rustle of the palms remind me that I am somewhere far more special.

I could go on forever about the organic cuisine at Crescent Moon - from the daily roasted coffee to the freshly squeezed starfruit juice that is a must-try for its sweet and unfamiliar flavour. But it would be simpler to say that it is an experience of discovery, unique at least to the wider world if not also to the cuisine of Dominica.



Living at Crescent Moon Cabins (even if it is a lifespan of just two, fulfilling days) is not about appeasing one's guilty conscience over the extravagant waste or polluting power of the developed world, nor is it about returning to some idealistic (but ultimately imaginary) era of humanity living 'at one' with nature. It is more that there is no clash of technology and nature. These days, Jeanie even has an e-book to read from while she waters in the greenhouse.

Overall, the lifestyle is one which advocates relinquishing the toys and ornaments which might have materialistic significance but (as one quickly realises here) only serves to detract from the magic that is Dominica's environment - on display and ready to sample. It is precisely by being able to forgo the tricks and feints of the urbane that one sees that Luxury can also come from the deep soil, the wandering sky and chance happenings of the flora and fauna just as much as it does from the workings of marble and chrome.



Cocoa Cottage

In Roseau Valley, just ten minutes' drive above the city proper, there is a small guest house, a work of artistry and the artisanal by a tremendously dedicated and creative individual called Iris. Walk down the driveway, to the open kitchen just around the corner, and if you're lucky you might find Iris making one of her tasty concoctions.

Cocoa Cottage is an amazing project, the renovation having been completed this year, but always undergoing changes and improvements, and anyone who loves the quirky places frequented by other seasoned and discerning travellers will want to stay here. At first sight of various objects lying around and on display, you might think that the place is a bit of a jumble - which would be somewhat correct. Among her various works about the place, Iris will collect the flotsam and jetsam along the beach and piece it together. Whether it is the mosaic lining a mirror, the ceramic shard facade on the low walls, or the deadwood swinging seat, one can see that the creation of the Cocoa Cottage is an organic process in itself, relying on the whims of the beach as much as it does on the particular direction its artist wants to take.



The rooms themselves are sensible and comfortable; the honeymoon suite (located in a separate building and the best room) with its private porch has the best view of the jungle valley just behind Cocoa Cottage. With slats along the whole of its curving wall, one can open up the room at night to get the cool breezes that penetrate up here. During the day, the river below bubbles along and the palms reaching up almost into your room are bright green; after dark, the ubiquitous birdcalls and insect chatter come out all around you, and you realise that in Dominica, being on the very edge of the jungle is near enough to being in it.

Iris, a pilot in another life, like most people wanted to escape from the humdrum banality of ordinary life; unlike most people, she has determined to stick with it for more than eight years and is an inspiring person to chat to over your morning coffee. At Cocoa Cottage the only rule is to be yourself (although it helps if being yourself involves being sociable). You get a sense of Dominican life and of the Dominican people as

Iris' friends and colleagues wander in and out, at any time of the day, always cheery and eager to converse. One's experience here is almost entirely freeform.

Chat or don't chat, try your hand at the piano in the lounge, sit by the brook below or anything else - who said that luxury had to have boundaries and limits? You can even go to the kitchen, raid the fridge and cook for yourself, although if Iris offers to make you a meal you should readily accept and get a taste of what she can whip seemingly from just a few things here and there. One thing I get to try is her tahini, a sesame seed spread, with a pita sandwich. I ask whether she consciously prepares food in a Mediterranean style: 'not particularly', she replies, 'it's just that it's a classically great combination of flavours'. Iris is not just limited to tahini, of course, but has an inspired touch to everything that she prepares: roasted coconut (meant to be eaten with bread, but so delicious I end up eating the oat-like clusters on their own), and homemade

guava and star fruit jellies are just some of the things I had for breakfast, probably the best meals at Cocoa Cottage. As well as these condiments and warm bread to have them with, I am consistently undone by a deluge of fresh fruits, eggs cooked however you like them and avocado. The latter, carved into thick slices, is so sweet and flavoursome compared to the soft mush at home that you can eat it as fruit itself (in fact any of the usual balsamic vinegar and olive oil would destroy its juicy flavour). Eating such a bountiful meal, all the while listening to Iris's favourite Miles Davis tracks, is very close to achieving a sort of heaven on earth.

Other things to do here, when it is the right season, is try Iris' homemade chocolate; if Iris' culinary skills and the freshness of the fruits and avocados is anything to go by, sampling her cocoa will be a veritable, existential revelation.

Cocoa Cottage is also the home of Extreme Dominica, a group that organises canyoning around the Morne Trois Pitons national park. It is a combination of ziplining, climbing and swimming along the gorges, and while I missed an opportunity to take part in one of the tours, it is a definite recommend for anyone who wants a bit of excitement in such a rare opportunity.



Secret Bay

Away from the waterfalls, volcanoes and mountain lakes of the Morne Trois Pitons jungle, along the dryer north coast, you will find Secret Bay. Be careful to watch for it, as it is set back from the road and relatively easy to miss despite the sign. Once you enter in and drive down the small road to the central, grass covered square you will discover the first of many surprises here. If the idea of a secret is that the majority of people don't know about it, then by logical extension the secret is shared among just a select few; and Secret Bay has taken the art of hospitality to a whole new level with this kind of thinking.



There are only two buildings on-site that aren't guesthouses, the first being the security house by the gate, and a small hut selling snacks to customers after a hot day out in the water. Otherwise, the housing units each occupy a different part of the estate, a lonely tower along the walkways that silently cut through the thickets all around. This decentralised service (for there is the entire team of cleaning staff, managers and even the option of a personal chef for all three meals) is part of Secret Bay's philosophy to provide a seamless experience of intimacy between the guests at each of their rentals.

This hands-off, on call but distanced approach is reflected in every aspect of the hotel. The limit-structure architecture, using the minimal amount of structural support for the building above, creates the dreamlike effect of these wooden longhouses supported by slim, curvaceous stems of concrete and the air in between. Indeed, the spaces below several of the houses are tall and open enough to create an additional floor for open air dining, relaxation and bathing in your own private swimming pool.

It is similarly reflected in the construction and maintenance process that will please any eco-lodge and environmental enthusiast. In their large, forested site only four trees were chopped down (co-owner Sandra recounts to me the reason for each individual, mainly disease or age-related) and the policy of clearing as little as necessary continues to this day. All the timber and building materials, save for the greenwood (noted for its extreme resilience) imported from French Guyana, are Dominican. Even the impact on the local community



was monitored, with the hotel offering training and financial support for one of the nearby villages and a continued investment in community projects. Secret Bay's policy of low environmental impact, both man-made and natural, is as interesting as the hotel itself and has aided the creation of the estate as

a kind of sanctuary, easily felt in the atmosphere as well as in the suggestions of the physical form and managerial style.

Sitting at one of the tables, outside or in, at your fastness of Greenwood and gorgeous Dominican Redwood timbers, overlooking the emerald life below and the blue seas on the horizon, there is a sense of true tranquility all around you, ready to fill you will the feeling of well-being should you let it. Another of the 'features' around Secret Bay are the meditation platforms, easily connected through a tangle of walkways to the guesthouses and featuring nothing more than a wooden platform with sofas and chairs.

Even if one does not engage in formalised meditation, or meditation in any sense at all, these secluded areas are great for a wistful afternoon, talking and reflecting on the beauty of the world around. How often do we forget that one of the greatest luxuries in the modern world is to sit still, without repercussions or the mobile phone blaring away, and soak in the vibrancy of life?

And of course there is the eponymous bay, one of the best (and only) beaches that this writer saw on the west coast of Dominica. The only access to it is from the next beach over, either swimming or kayaking. I would recommend the latter in the late afternoons for the opportunity to sit in the craft and admire from the water both the bay and the breathtaking sunsets which spontaneously occur here too (in this case it was a rare lavender and regal purple splashes across the waning daylight). The white sand beach is a welcome comfort from the harder, less forgiving rocky coastline elsewhere. While here, take the opportunity to snorkel, the corals reaching almost all the way up to the shore itself and just as rich as any deeper locales (although there is a greater risk of contact with the massive spines of the sea urchins).

Do take a guide with you to the cave... did I mention the secret cave? Just as we will leave out images of the secret bay so that it remains a surprise rounding the cliff for the first time, the secret cave is best explored rather than described. *



A relaxing deckpool