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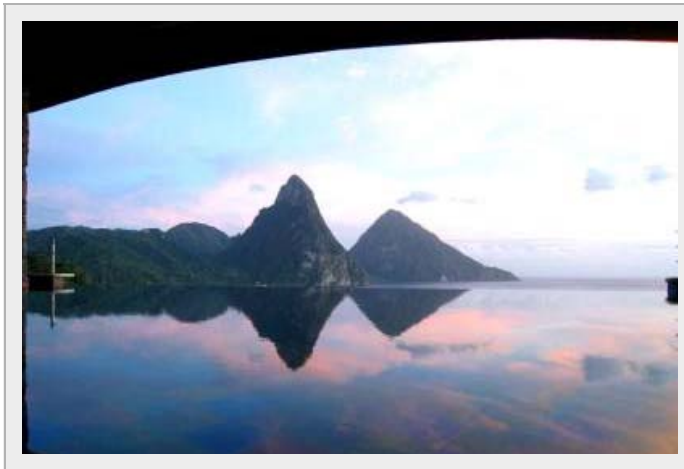
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St Lucia: The Caribbean's Uncut Gem

Source: By Joshua Ostroff, AOL.ca
Posted: 07/30/09 1:56PM
Filed Under: Travel

Back when the French and British were fighting fiercely over the tropical islands dotting the Caribbean sea, the most prized piece of paradise was St. Lucia. The mountainous beach-ringed slice of land was known as "Helen of the West Indies" because of its near-mythological beauty—and because the two empires went to war over it a full fourteen times.

St. Lucian Landscapes



Joshua Ostroff

20 photos

View of the Pitons reflected across the inside pool of a Jade Mountain hotel room.

(Note: Please disable your pop-up blocker)

Inside St. Lucia

[St Lucia: Jade Mountain](#)

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The Brits finally wrested control in 1814—making English the official language, though place names are largely French and the islanders also speak Creole patois—and St Lucia celebrated 30 years of independence in February. But somehow when the tourism hordes invaded, they established beachheads in the Bahamas, Trinidad and Barbados, but largely overlooked this small windward island-nation nestled on the edge of the Lesser Antilles.



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Travel Photos of the Week



Sankar Sridhar

The Zanskar River, Ladakh, India. Winner, Best Photograph, Mountain Adventure, 2009 Banff Mountain Photography Competition.

Of course, there are all-inclusive hotels on the island—heck, Amy Winehouse has been kicked out of most of them—but St Lucia also boasts some spectacularly unique boutique hotels and one-of-a-kind luxury resorts that allow you to properly experience this practically unspoiled island the way it deserves.

Most flights land in the far southern tip of the island, on a US air force base turned international airport, which means there's some travel to get to wherever you're going. Nothing is very far—the entire island is only 620 km² and much of that is taken up by the interior's sprawling, 19,000 acre St Edmunds rainforest—but there aren't many roads, either. No worries, though, since the slim, windy road circling and bisecting the island takes you on a spectacular drive past dramatic coastlines and fern-encrusted cliffsides, coco plantations and Colonial military forts, pastel-coloured villages and verdant jungles.

St Lucia boasts a throwback feel. People still wash their clothes in the river, schoolchildren all wear crisp uniforms, the old colonial families (Deboulay, Devaux, Chastenet) still hold some sway, and the former capital of Soufrière is a one-traffic light town. With a population of only 160,000, almost half of whom live in the capital Castries, the volcanic island never feels crowded, not even from tourism.

Of course, that is at least partially due to the ongoing Great Recession which has affected travel throughout the region. But mostly it's because of St Lucia's renowned boutique resorts like Jade Mountain, Jalousie Plantation, Ti Kaye Village and Coco Palm. These private, luxurious hideaways eschew the cookie-cutter approach of the traditional all-inclusive in favour of a refreshingly unique vacation experience.

The busiest tourist area is Rodney Bay, a former upscale residential neighbourhood that attracted bars, cafes and restaurants to serve the local and expat population. Soon, small hotels and all-inclusive resorts began popping up to bring travelers close to Reduit Beach, the longest stretch of sand in the region, and Pigeon Island, a historical landmark that was once home to Amerindians, British troops and, most infamously, the original wooden leg pirate Jambe de Bois.

Despite this, Rodney Bay is by no means overrun. Though staying here certainly offers the most party opportunities on this otherwise laidback island—especially on Friday nights when the nearby fishing village of Gros Islet brings out the speaker stacks, Piton beers and local foodstuffs (not to mention dreadlocked rastas selling “bob marleys”) for the weekly street party known as the Jump-Up. The tradition began about 25 years ago as a local party, but as the hotels blossomed grew in Rodney Bay, more and more tourists would come by. It may not feel as authentic as it once did, but wait it out a few hours and after the senior citizens head back to bed, the locals (and remaining drunk tourists) start to let loose to the pounding dancehall and soca.

Life in St. Lucia



Joshua Ostroff

14 photos

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Travel Postcard



Joshua Ostroff

Visit the Caribbean's uncut gem.

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Every Friday night, locals and tourists get down at the Friday night "Jump Up" street party in the fishing village of Gros Islet.

(Note: Please disable your pop-up blocker)

If you're looking for a more laidback experience, than simply head south to the small fishing village of Anse La Rey, where a weekly "Fish Fry" takes over the small streets every Friday. More focused on food than dancing, it's a don't-miss experience while on the island. The town is quaint, the people are friendly, the kids are cute and it's the best opportunity to gorge on traditionally prepared St Lucian seafood, like fishcakes, fried snapper and BBQ conch, all drenched in Baron's West Indian hot sauce.

But the one place that you really can't miss is the pyramid-shaped Pitons. Oprah even said so, famously dubbing this UNESCO World Heritage site one of the five places everyone should see in their lifetimes. These enormous 250,000-year-old volcanic cones were prayed to by original Carib Indian tribes and provided shelter to escaped slaves. The base of the Gros Piton, where you enter the steep-but-well-worth-it climbing trail, is the community Fond Gens Libre, from where black freedom fighters launched a slave rebellion in the mid-1700s. Many of their descendants still live there and act as hiking guides up the 800 meter slope. The Petit Piton is also climbable, though the government would prefer you didn't since it requires proper mountain climbing gear and is extremely dangerous. Last fall, an American climber infamously fell and was caught by a tree branch, only to have to hold on for 12 hours until a rescue copter arrived from Martinique.

Nearby the Pitons is sleepy Soufrière, which sits within a volcanic caldera and boasts a still-bubbling "drive-in" volcano on the outskirts of town. You can walk amongst the steamy sulphur springs or take a dip in the stone mineral baths just like the island's one-time resident, French empress Josephine Bonaparte. There are also beautiful waterfalls—as seen in Superman II and Romancing the Stone—and if you head inland, plenty of jungle hikes.

Tourism has been on the rise in recent years, especially from Canada thanks to an increase in direct flights, so right now is the best time to enjoy one of the world's most relaxing places. St Lucia won't be so wonderfully chill forever.

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Hurricane Hole = Marigot Bay, which is in the photo gallery. Beautiful place.

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It is a beautiful spot, one of the nicest and least cultivated Islands. Why not mention Hurrican Hole, where Rex Harrison filmed the original Dr. Dolittle, where the british Sailing Fleet found refuge during the Hurricane and the enemy ships broke up in the storm. There is way more to it than Rastafarion Hawkers Streetdancing or banana trees.

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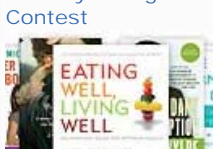


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