

The Pitons are symbolic of the island's strength and resilience

# TWIN PEAKS

Home to the world's only drive-through volcano, a chocolate-themed hotel in verdant rainforests and the stunning UNESCO-protected Pitons, St Lucia deserves its title as the best Caribbean island

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Leaning into the Western-style saddle, heels down as I've been instructed, I watch as my horse's ears prick forwards, and he daintily steps over the driftwood onto the beach. His hooves leave marks in the golden sand that arches around a bay framed by swaying palm trees. 'Come on boy,' I whisper, nudging my 15-hand gelding towards the waves of the Atlantic lapping the shore. We are at Pointe des Cannelles in St Lucia, and if I start trotting by the water's edge I'm about to tick off 'horse riding in the sea on a Caribbean island' from my bucket list. I smile as I breathe in the fresh, salty air while the sun warms my face, and the breeze plays with my hair. Heck, it's so good that next time I might even bring my husband and ask to be let off the leading rein.

I can horse ride. I even owned my own mare as a child, but my current ride's name describes how good I am now. Rusty. So, I don't mind Nike – the name of my guide from the Atlantic Shores Riding Stables – literally taking the reins. And once we clamber up to the top of the cliffs overlooking Long Bay Beach, I'm very glad of his assistance. As egrets wade by the beach below or whirl overhead, and brightly coloured butterflies land on the lush landscape, Rusty walks just feet from the cliff edge. 'This is a secluded beach,' Nike says, pointing down to a cove below. 'It's just for locals to gallop their horses along although we sometimes go cliff-jumping from here when the water is calm.' The next bay along, Nike tells me, is Honeymoon Beach. I don't want to know about what might happen there.

As the afternoon sun beats down, we see goats, horses roaming free 'tethered' only by

a long rope dragging behind them and two small children playing in the shade under some trees outside their house who flash huge smiles and shout 'hello' as we pass.

St Lucia has been named the best and most beautiful Caribbean island by everyone from *The Times* to *Global Traveller* magazine and it's easy to see why. Just an eight-hour flight from London, the descent into Hewanorra airport comes complete with views over the volcanic twin peaks of the Pitons, which are so stunning they've been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

With tropical rainforests, cocoa plantations, crystal-clear water and pristine talcum-powder beaches in every hue from white to black sand, the island is a slice of paradise. No wonder it's been used as a backdrop to myriad movies including in *Superman 2* when Christopher Reeve's man of steel flew here to pick some exotic plants for Lois Lane.

Nowadays everyone from Harrison Ford to Oprah Winfrey, Gwyneth Paltrow and Matt Damon holiday in St Lucia, no doubt bewitched by the natural scenery and the spicy blend of Creole culture. This is an island that the French and the British both wanted after all – it changed hands between them 14 times but finally became independent on February 22, 1979.

Evidence of the islanders' partying to celebrate their freedom is everywhere – even the roadside telegraph poles have been painted yellow, blue, white and black – the colours of the national flag.

We are staying at Coconut Bay Beach Resort & Spa, a premium all-inclusive nestled in 85 acres along the ocean front with a mile long beach in the south of the island. Just four minutes (exactly, I timed >



## TRAVEL

it) from the international airport, Coconut Bay is the perfect Caribbean escape. Divided into adults-only Harmony, and child-friendly Splash resorts, there is even a luxury retreat for honeymooners – or those just eager to get away from it all at a five-star enclave – called Serenity at Coconut Bay.

With only 36 plunge pool suites – that come complete with butler service, personalised bar, king-size four-poster bed and walk-in rain shower – this is opulent romance at its luxurious best.

Coconut Bay is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, but it is constantly evolving and adding to the facilities – which

ingenious platform that can swivel to always face the sun – or take tanning up a notch in the five-star beach *cabanas*. Right on the sand, these come with butler service, a cooler full of drinks, and a huge bed suspended from the ceiling which lulls you to sleep.

But I'm eager to explore the island and join the 'sea and land' excursion which starts with a catamaran tour. Sunlight bounces off the azure waves as we sail, while our guide points out various points of interest. We pass by Jade Mountain, the island's most expensive hotel, where the 29 open air suites – known as sanctuaries – look over the mighty Pitons, and each have an infinity pool and hot tub.

### 'Casually Caribbean, you can take a dip in the sea, lounge in a hammock or on one of the very comfortable sunbeds'

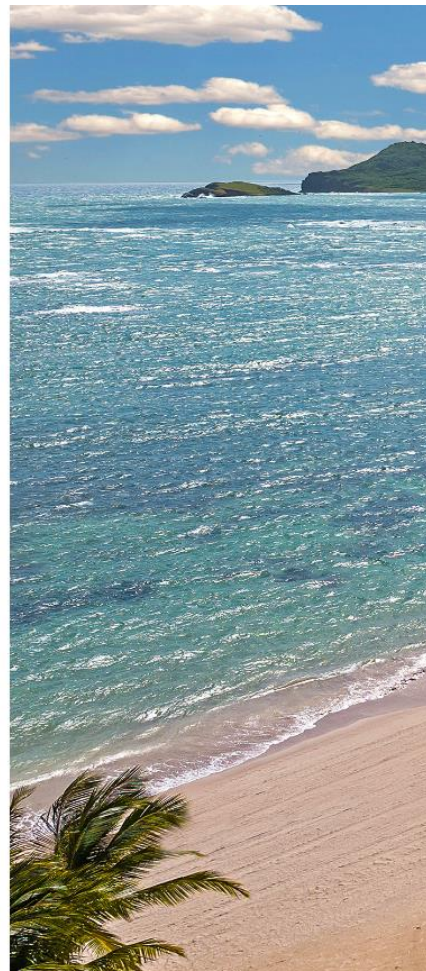
include eight restaurants, seven bars, five pools, a water park, spa, fitness centre, kids' club, tennis, pickleball and basketball courts, petting zoo, *cabanas* and a wedding pavilion on the beach.

My room is huge, pretty and newly refurbished. It's kept spotlessly clean by Rose who leaves petals, towel art and inspirational notes on my bed every day. There's plenty to do here – or, like many, you can choose to do nothing at all.

Casually Caribbean, you can take a dip in the sea, lounge in a hammock or on a very comfortable sunbed – which comes on an

Depending on the season, these stunning suites can cost between \$1,385-\$4,340 per night. Guests are given a water gun when they check-in for scaring off any warblers or blackbirds that might fly inside.

We stop at Sugar Beach – A Viceroy Resort for a dip in the sea and to enjoy some peace and quiet on one of the two pristine white beaches. The queen of Goop, Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow brings her family here to stay in one of the plantation-style villas dotted across 100 acres of rainforest. 'Matt Damon was just here,' our guide tells us. 'Yeah man, he's always here.' In fact *The*



The Grande Suite at Serenity is a luxury enclave



Harmony's pool and Tiki bar





The beach cabanas are a luxury way to spend the day on the beach

*Bourne Identity* star booked out the entire resort so he could renew his vows with wife in front of guests that included Ben Affleck and Chris Hemsworth. To keep it a secret he booked it under the name of Mr and Mrs Naff.

Back on the catamaran we head towards the Pitons, the two volcanic spires rising from the sea and covered in lush vegetation. They're made up of Gros Piton, which the brave-hearted can spend a few gruelling hours climbing to be rewarded with a breathtaking view of the island, and Petit Piton, which is much steeper and not advised to hike. These twin peaks are symbolic of the strength, resilience and spirit of the island for the islanders – and a great backdrop for tourists and influencers' pictures.

We smell them before we see them – a distinct whiff of eggy sulphur. 'Get that?' our guide asks as we all gag. 'That's good. If there's no smell they're about to erupt.'

The smell continues as we land at Soufriere and head to the island's most visited tourist attraction – Sulphur Springs, the world's only drive-through volcano. Tourists can tour bubbling pools of sulphurous hot springs



The waterfall is like a hydro massage!

and boiling geysers before taking a dip in the mineral-rich mud baths.

Stripping down to a swimming costume – dark as advised because the mud can stain lighter ones – I plunge into the hot springs, some of which are 45°C. 'That's *hoooot*,' I yelp, forcing myself to sink into the muddy water.

After boiling myself for a few minutes I step out and dry off before applying grey mud all over my face and body. 'It will make you look 10 years younger,' I'm promised, so I lather on some more. There are buckets of thick, black mud dotted around and I follow what the rest of the tourists are doing and dip my hands in and paint markings all over my body – and 'war stripes' on my face. We all look ridiculous but it's great fun and I'm hoping nature's botox will give me the gift of youth once I wash it all off.

My skin is surprisingly soft once it's over and we head to the nearby Toraille Waterfall which is meant to be a refreshing dip with the bonus of a 'hydro' massage. It looks painful to me, but plenty of male tourists in their tiny speedos seem to be enjoying themselves. We leave to wind our way round the vertiginous >



## TRAVEL



All Serenity's suites come with a plunge pool

roads to The Beacon restaurant. It has a buffet of delicious local, creole food – and a view looking down over the town, bay, Pitons and sea.

Afterwards, on the way back to Coconut Bay, we pass by the Rabot Hotel from Hotel Chocolat, a chocolate-themed hotel nestled in the island's rainforests. There are cacao plantations all over the island and guests can come here to visit Project Chocolat, set across six-acres at the home of the cacao farm to see the process for making the beloved sweet treat – and even creating your own chocolate bar.

For the rest of the journey our driver Spencer treats us to a tour of the produce grown in St Lucia. We learn that the plants which the bananas grow on die after producing a bunch of the fruit – but create baby off-shoots or suckers that will continue the cycle. Green figs aren't figs at all but green bananas. Almonds grow on trees – and are poisonous, acting like acid, before they're ripe. 'Can you see the pineapples?' Spencer asks, stopping our bus. He laughs as we all look upwards. 'They're there,' he says, pointing to the land, where pineapples are growing. He's still laughing about it as we pull into the resort, where there's just time for a proper shower before dinner.

Coconut Bay has so many all-inclusive food options, guests need to pack clothes with elasticated waist bands. I like the Caribbean food in Calabash, and Asian dishes in Silk – the tofu is outstanding. Jerk Tree House is always packed thanks to the chef's spicy jerk sauce slathered over literally everything, and there's a family favourite, Flip Flops, serving burgers, pizza, fries and more. But the stand-out eatery has to be The Greathouse at Serenity where the Mediterranean and Caribbean-inspired menu



The lazy river has a surprise!



The mud at Sulphur Springs can make you look younger

is crafted by a Greek executive chef. The gourmet *à la carte* restaurant is included in the Serenity package but others can pay to dine here. I feast on a Mediterranean platter which includes falafel, kalamata, hummus, roasted tomato dip and a Greek salad, followed by a vegan *shepherd's* pie – that's how they spell it – while others dine on pan-seared scallops, filet mignon and jumbo shrimp or the catch of the day. Washed down with chilled rosé in the private dining room, it's an absolute treat.

The rest of our stay is a blur of beach, bar and bingeing on divine food. We enjoy the Caribbean-themed night with beachside buffet, fire-eaters and dancing, afternoons in the resort's lazy river and sipping cocktails *alfresco* under the setting sun. It's a glorious way to unwind and just before heading home we're treated to a massage at the Sanctuary Spa's ocean-front *cabana*. What better way to relax than with a deep-tissue treatment, the sound of the waves and a cacophony of exotic birds in the background? It's totally tropical bliss. I'm already planning my return – with the husband this time. ●

### GETTING THERE:

**Accommodation only rate:** All-inclusive seven-night stay from £1,249 per person in a Splash Deluxe Garden View room, based on double occupancy. Valid for travel between August 23-29 and October 4-10. Find out more: [cbayresort.com](http://cbayresort.com)