

Notes on a St. Lucian stay

M.Y. Gran Finale arrived late July 2009 for what was originally planned as a three month stay to keep us out of the hurricane corridor. I write this January 2010 and we have been based here at IGY's Rodney Bay Marina for all of that time, with a few cruises around Martinique and St. Vincent & Grenadines. The marina crew has made our stay very positive, always smiling and friendly. Dockmaster Adam has consistently been helpful, welcoming and always available to offer information - and even his car for provisioning. I have to say that the weather over summer was amazing, mostly light winds (apart from a couple of big blows), little rain and sunshine, glorious sunshine.

General:

The locals here have been very friendly in my experience - greet them with smiles and pleasantries and they are gracious back. Unfortunately I had to be really firm at the Rodney Bay Mall while loading provisions, a guy insisted on helping, then of course wanted paying so that was my first negative experience the day I arrived. Soufriere is horrendous for touts too. As with every Caribbean island, they are everywhere but usually a firm 'no' is enough and they back down. I have heard of one mugging while we've been here, which happened around 3.00am. Two girls were walking home from The Loft in Rodney Bay (right at the end of the dark road). Whenever we've been in any doubt, I've hailed a cab. I have rarely felt unsafe here but generally am quite careful as a female down island. We did have an interesting drive the first weekend we arrived, got very off the beaten track and felt most uncomfortable, passing shanty towns on single lane roads. In reality, I think it was natural fear of the unknown and it was, in hindsight, a really interesting experience. The roads here are long and windy. The west coast roads past Soufriere get really bad. There are vans which are buses (like St. Maarten), just hail them and it's usually \$1 EEC. Taxi's from the marina to Rodney Bay are \$5EEC per person, there are always taxis waiting by the gate of the marina.

Activities:

The highlight of my trip is still the Piton climbs. Petit Piton (2,461ft) was undertaken by a group of 11 yacht crew, ranging in age and ability. We called a guide 758 286 0382 (Aaron?) and met him at the base. Or Ben Saltabis can organize guides 758 459 5457. We were on the road from Rodney Bay at 6.30am as the total climb (return) is approx. 6 hours. He was pretty helpful towards the top when you get to the vertical climbs with anchored ropes. The trail is not always obvious so although he charged a hefty 60EC each it was necessary to have a guide. Watch you don't cause a rock avalanche. We had a close call.

Gros Piton (2,619ft) was a much easier climb, still, you will need some base fitness. 2 ½ hours to the top with regular 10 minute rest stops. Call St. Lucia Tourist office on 758 285 6058 or Gros Piton Guides Association on 758 459 3492 to arrange a guide and climb time. I think it was 80ECC each. A guide is really not necessary on Gros since the track is well trodden, complete with steps and handrails! However, since it is a world heritage site, the charge is apparently compulsory in order to maintain the track. The views from the secondary lookout at the peak are stunning, looking at Petit Piton and the ocean. Wear appropriate footwear for both climbs and take LOTS of water and snacks. The Pitons of course give the local beer its name.

Body Holiday Le Sport Resort was a winner with our crew. 10 minutes drive north. \$31USD for a lunch pass, begins at 12.30pm and ends at 3pm (although we frequently overstayed). Buffet lunch or deli, all you can eat and drink, plus use of the snorkel gear, pool and beach. Stick your flag in the sand and the waiters come and take your order. What more do you need! The spa here is fantastic but quite expensive. There are other day pass packages (for the hobi cats etc.) but this is the only one we've used. All the resorts here have similar passes. All beaches on St. Lucia are open to the public, though obviously you have no right to use their beach chairs without paying for a pass.

Diving – while I have not been during our stay here, the guests claim the dives to be some of the best ever done. The visibility has been affected greatly by the swell but on good days, 100ft plus. The Piton area has been best for diving, call Ben Saltabis 758 459 5457 as there is a charge in the Marine Park, approx. \$60 USD per person per dive. Anse Chastenet offers the best snorkeling.

The rainforest of St. Lucia's mountainous interior are supposed to be wonderful for hiking and bird watching. There is a nature trail through the Diamond Botanical Gardens in Soufriere, which features hot mineral baths and the cascading Diamond Falls. The Soufriere Volcano is world's only drive-in volcanic crater.

At Desbarra on the east coast is a protection site for the giant leatherback turtles where, in season, you can watch the baby turtles hatch and make their first dash towards the ocean. We missed the season; most disappointed.

For the golfers, St. Lucia Country club is located just north of Rodney Bay. Current pricing is \$115 USD per round, plus \$50 for Callaway club hire and \$20 for Regular club hire. The regulars are in terrible condition.

The Brig Pirate ship which sails from the marina has full day or sunset cruise tickets. The full day is \$100 USD and takes you down to Soufriere Volcano, past Pitons, into Marigot bay for sunset pictures, swim stop, food and drink included. Kind of a bus man's holiday so we shamefully have not been on it! We did manage to fire our loud, smoky canon at them out in the bay, they returned fire. Guests loved it, very comical. There are other sunset catamaran cruises which look like fun but with a tender and yacht to play with, we didn't feel the need to part with more cash for pleasure boating. Rodney Bay is great for wakeboarding etc.

Marigot Bay is very pretty and the journey is not too bad from here. On the subject of driving, the locals can be pretty crazy with their overtaking and there are a lot of hairpin bends and hills. We're used to it now but for the right hand side drivers among you, bonne chance. 40mins drive from here. Take the turn off the main road. The lookout at the top is picturesque, then keep driving straight and you will end up at the car park and Discovery Bay Resort at the bottom of a steep hill. A few shops in the marina and possibly the best restaurant we have found on the island. Rainforest Hideaway. Our guests have also been several times, they loved it. You park up and walk to the ferry dock, \$5 ECC one way and runs all night. The ferry also can take you to the little beach, though it's better from afar. Snorkeling here was terrible.

We visited the Micoud Botanical Gardens, one of many on the island; spent a nice afternoon wandering through and had homemade ice cream at the café. There are also a number of estates open to the public, Balenbouche in the South is one.

Restaurants:

The Ladera Resort, set between the majestic Piton's with stunning ocean views, boasts a restaurant called Dasheene. Jalouise was another favourite. The Coal Pot near the airport in Castries comes highly recommended – Creole. Apparently the new Pink House in Castries, owned by Coal Pot, is also great - Creole. Cap Maison & Cotton Bay– high end but fabulous. The Landings Resort (north of marina) for lunch is a great experience. Then you can pay \$50USD for a day pass for using the beach and pool, but they recognize us now so we do get a small discount. Rodney Bay: Big Chef for steak. Charthouse for ribs. The Edge for sushi. Delirious for overall atmosphere (best place for going out on Friday / Saturday nights too, heats up after 10pm). H2O in the marina is great but wait times for meals is often an hour, really good when it arrives. Key Largo pizza restaurant under Sportivo gym (see later) is also pretty good. Spinnakers on the beach serves good baguettes at lunch.

Nightlife:

Jump Up – Friday night highlight for the area, held at Gros Islet, 5 mins north in a taxi, we've been once and really enjoyed it but watch your wallets, girls take off the jewellery and I would not recommend walking home; male or female. Taxi. Music is loud and a very local experience. The food is local and eclectic, rumour has it that the same ribs at the Charthouse are cooked by a lady on a stall on Friday here but not sure where. Cheap eating and even cheaper drinking. The Happy Cock is a good meeting place if you're not moving as a group.

Denney Fish Fry – Saturday nights. Linus 758 384 3016 (is a reliable taxi for guests and airport runs), took us and we had a great night with him and his girlfriend. Turtle Stew and fresh Local Lobster was our menu but you can choose from all sorts of interesting foods. Cleanest toilet around; pay at the bar. Again, loud music and dancing. A very St. Lucian experience.

Shopping:

The Rodney Bay Mall has a slither of shops but don't get too excited. The new Casino and Mall should fill a hole. There are a few boutique shops in Castries but again, nothing like Europe or the US! The hotels have boutiques in them too, Rodney Bay Beach has a sprinkle of good shops in the resorts along the beach front if you have time to scout.

Provisioning:

Mega J's on the left heading into Castries, on the first roundabout you come to, is good for big stocks. Similar to Costco. The best supermarket we have found is past Mega J's on the left hand side once the road turns into 2 lanes. Super J's is a chain but this one seems to be better stocked than the Rodney Bay ones. The liquor store in the marina claims to import for the island. They can order you almost anything Sprite Zero, San Pellegrino Orange, etc. Fresh milk has been hard to source on a regular basis. Super J's and Mega J's both stock it but sporadically and it's often turned already despite the expiry date.

Gregory is the Fruit and Vegetable boat man in the marina, cruising around with his flags impeding any real motor progress. We frequently had to negotiate prices at the start but he knows now not to rip us off. The fruit here has been amazing. The island is basically organic by nature. There is St. Lucia Organics, a vegetable co-operative who sell at the gym, or once a week in the marina. www.stluciaorganics.com Pattie Dillon tel. 758 457 1632 or cell 758 718 5096. The lettuce is great and chef pre-ordered with him before guest trips. Rowland, head chef at H20 can help with 'yacht grade' meat and fish orders 758 458 4651 or cell 758 285 5363. Crown Foods north of the marina, first left past Gros Islet is good for bulk meats etc, this supplies many restaurants on the island but it's order form only. We imported a meat & fish order from Florida through Vieux Fort airport and ended up having to get a vet to escort it to the boat. Very problematic, would not recommend. Home Depot is reasonably well stocked, on the right hand side before you get to Castries. Johnson's Hardware is good for things like plastic tubs and is a rival for Home Depot.

Health & Beauty:

Paula King (Ebony & Ivory) is an excellent hairdresser, 758 520 3163. Call for an appointment as it's not a high street salon. The house is located towards Rodney Bay Mall, turn left where the gym / pizza place is, over the small crossroads and head straight approx. 100m, it's on the right hand side BEFORE the bend in the road, the left (end) house in a terrace.

Body Holiday is a beautiful spa but a little pricey.

The Coco Beauty Clinic at the Coco Palms Hotel in Rodney Bay is better priced; Monique is the therapist. Coco Palms reception: 758 456 2800. Massages here are great too.

Health shops – there's a small one next door to Sportivo gym/Key Largo pizza called Healthe Shoppe. There is another one on the right hand side as you drive towards the mall, a corner lot, before the mall where the pharmacy and bank are. Walk under the building and then head up the stairs. The latter is well stocked. You can get bread flour here.

Some of our crew has used gym membership at Sportivo Now! on the way to Rodney Bay mall, left hand side, above Key Largo pizza. www.sportivonow.com 758 452 8899. You can either join for 1 or 3 months, or pay per session, or for 10 sessions. \$150 ECC for 1 month. Classes are additional (spinning etc). Annoyingly, often one or more of the cardio machines are broken. Morning is much quieter, they open at 6am. Super friendly.

Accommodation:

My family visited us here in St Lucia so we stayed off the boat at Coco Palms for 4 nights. Our room was very basic (and noisy as opposite Delirious) but my parents upgraded and had a great room for a very reasonable rate. The pool facing rooms are reasonable too. E-mail or call them direct as they will negotiate on price. www.coco-resorts.com or 758 456 2800

Airports:

Castries is the small local airport and only 15mins drive. Vieux Fort is the larger and takes 1hr 15mins. It's a scenic drive but long and on very windy roads. Go through Castries, head round the water then take the left at the 'Virgin' roundabout. Next turning is at a T junction; take a left and an almost immediate right turn. Follow that road all the way. You can miss the airport entrance it's so small, on the right hand side with a cattle grid.

I hope some of this information is helpful to visiting yacht crew and that you enjoy your stay here in St. Lucia as much as we have. There are still many things that we have not visited or discovered so enjoy finding them.