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Island-hopping in St. Vincent, Grenadines offers taste of beauty, adventure

BY ERIC VOHR
Chicago Tribune

For some, the ideal tropical holiday is a gated all-inclusive resort where time is spent shuttling between the beach and the pool bar.

For those looking for a little more substance, St. Vincent and the Grenadines in the Caribbean beckons with its 32 islands and cays - not to mention some of the best beaches you'll find anywhere.

St. Vincent, the biggest island in the chain by far, boasts rainforests, waterfalls and volcanoes, the biggest being La Soufriere, which rises to an impressive 4,049 feet.

The trek to the summit is a heart-pumping, breathtaking adventure through a ruggedly beautiful landscape of lush rainforest, montane thickets, cloud forest, old lava flows and creek beds worn smooth after years of tropical storms.

At the summit sits the ash-strewn rim of a massive crater, where an active steaming dome and a small lake lie below. This is an ominous, haunting place bathed in clouds and dew. Buffeting winds threaten to send you over the cliff, and gaps in the tumultuous vapors provide brief-but-stunning views of the blue-green sea below.

La Soufriere is just a taste of St. Vincent's natural wonders, which include a huge expanse of untamed coastline and jungle in the northwest part of the island. I wouldn't even attempt to explore it without an experienced local guide.

The place to stay on St. Vincent is Young Island Resort, located on a small, private island 200 yards off the southern tip of St. Vincent. A treasured destination for more than 40 years, Young Island has accommodations that include mountaintop villas with ocean views and waterfront bungalows that open up to a white-sand beach. Rates start around \$500 a night, double occupancy. Breakfast, dinner and delicious homemade bread are included (www.youngisland.com).

Trickling south from St. Vincent like a string of glittering white-sand pearls is the precious archipelago of the Grenadines. Several of these islands are inhabited. Mustique is the famed playground for celebrities and the British royal family, but I prefer the more

humble islands, especially Bequia.

Bequia is an intimate, magical place with a palpable sense of harmony among the expats, tourists and locals. It seems like everyone here is bound by either friendship or blood. Our hotel waiter was the cousin of our dive guide. Our other dive guide was the son of a Frenchman who owns our favorite restaurant and so on.

Bequia's capital, Port Elizabeth, has a wonderful selection of shops, bars, restaurants and art galleries. You might catch some of the local shipwrights building the island's traditional wooden boats, or drop by Sargeant Brothers Model Boat Shop to watch workers create amazing handcrafted models ranging from \$200 to \$7,000. They'll ship your souvenir vessel to your home.

From the center of town, a meandering footpath leads to the island's best beaches, Princess Margaret and Lower Bay. Another nice stretch of sand with a little more surf can be found at Friendship Beach, where the new Bequia Beach Hotel was designed to replicate West Indies architecture from the 1950s. Rates start at \$250 a night (www.bequiabeach.com).

Bequia Dive Adventures is one of the most respected outfits in town. One of its founders, Ron Williams, grew up near his shop on the main drag. He's a true-blue local who will show you the most amazing scuba diving spots around the island.

The third and most delightful stage of our trip unfolded on Petit St. Vincent, the kind of private island retreat beach that vacation dreams are made of. Its 115 acres were transformed into a resort more than half a century ago, when a group of sailors converged on the island and decided to build a small property. After a couple of years and the help of a Swedish architect (who also just happened to be sailing by), they opened for business.

With regular overnight rates starting at \$1,100 (including meals and butler service), Petit St. Vincent isn't for the budget traveler. It also isn't for folks addicted to their electronic devices. No Wi-Fi, TVs or telephones in the rooms. As manager Matt Semark likes to say, "We want our guests to be on vacation."

For communication, the resort uses a simple flag system: A yellow flag means you need service, a red flag means "leave me alone, I'm enjoying life" (www.petitstvincent.com).

If you can pry yourself out of your hammock, the diving is spectacular. Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of legendary underwater explorer Jacques Cousteau, set up an eponymous dive center here.

Given the many charms of this Caribbean nation, you'd expect it to be overrun with tourists. But the lack of an international airport has helped keep visitor numbers down. Most people have to fly to Barbados or St. Lucia before hopping on an interisland flight. Limited ferry service exists, but I wouldn't call it efficient or luxurious.

The tides of change are coming, though. St. Vincent is putting the final touches on its long-delayed new airport, which will service nonstop flights from the United States and Europe. It's supposed to open this year.

Whether the expected influx of tourists will markedly change St. Vincent and the Grenadines is anyone's guess. Either way, if you like a little spice in your sun-and-sea vacations, this magical island nation deserves to be on your list.

(Eric Vohr is a freelance writer.)



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