

# La Belle Héleñe

Lush rainforests, spectacular mountains, sparkling seas, friendly dolphins, and even a drive-in volcano... St Lucia is an island of delightful contrasts  
Words & photos:  
Chico Kidd

St Lucia is an island with soul. There's a natural and quite spiritual atmosphere to it – it's a wonderful place for anyone interested in holistic activities. It makes you feel in tune with nature. Just linger in the heart of the rainforest and soak up the atmosphere and energy of the verdant life there. It is magical, energising, and a great source of serenity and tranquility.

The island is so lush you think any plant could flourish there, and indeed huge quantities of fruit including mangoes, papayas, pineapples, passion-fruit, guavas, coconuts, and breadfruit are grown on St Lucia – and six different kinds of banana. If you go on a trip you soon begin to think you must have seen all of them many times over. Thousands of banana plants line the roads, laden with fruit, as far as the eye can see. The growing fruits are covered with big blue plastic bags to protect them from insects, and as they hang down at the height of an average person's torso, the plantations look as if they are full of Chelsea supporters.

But there's more than bananas to the island that's been dubbed "the Helen of the West Indies" for its sheer gorgeousness. Less developed than many Caribbean isles, it's laid-back and incredibly friendly. It has breathtaking rugged scenery – the fabulous Pitons are rightly as famous a landmark, and as instantly recognisable, as man-made wonders like the Sydney Opera House – honey-coloured sandy beaches, lush interior rainforests and its own thriving culture that ranges from the annual St Lucia Jazz Festival in the spring to the work of its very own Nobel laureate (one of two, both, coincidentally, born on January 23) for Literature, Derek Walcott. And not forgetting cricket, of course. Like all West Indians St Lucians are totally nuts about the sport, and refused to let the shocking Bob Woolmer tragedy mar this year's cricket World Cup. Two for-



midable ladies – Nadine George, the first West Indies female cricketer to score a century in a test match, and Verena Felicien – brought women's cricket to St Lucia.

Thrilling as the cricket may be for its fans, however, it's not everyone's cup of tea. Chilling on the beach is probably nearer the mark, and there's every opportunity to do plenty of that. For those who like to feel more in tune with nature, or get away from the beaten track, the rainforest beckons.

Ah yes, rainforest. There's a clue in the name. RAINforest. It is wet. A hundred and sixty inches of the stuff falls in a year as opposed to the 60 inches round the coast. And it is lush, lush, lush, exuberantly so. You apparently need 600 different kinds of tree, plant and shrub per acre before your forest is officially a rainforest. That's a lot of flora; but it's easy to believe there are that many species. It ranges from dainty vines that crawl up the tree trunks to the enormous, towering trees themselves, breathtakingly tall, straining ever upwards to the sunlight. There are tree ferns with 15-foot fronds, châtaignier trees that grow up to 50 or 60 feet in height and have leaves as long as your forearm, and wild breadfruit (which the St Lucian parrots adore) with velvety white flowers the size of saucers. Suspended on the trees are air plants about 20 times as big as the ones you buy in the garden centre, and a spectrum of orchids, vivid magenta, yellowy-green, deepest maroon.



*Clockwise from top left: rainforest, cacao pod, Marigot Bay, Sulphur Springs, Diamond Botanical Gardens*



Suspended on the trees are air plants about 20 times as big as the ones you buy in the garden centre



### Rainforests and Parrots

- St Lucia is 238 square miles in area of which 35 square miles are tropical rainforest. Currently 15 square miles of this are protected; the St. Lucia National Trust is working to get the remainder to join this status.
- Rainforests belong to the "tropical wet climate" group. The temperature rarely gets higher than 93°F (34°C) or drops below 68°F (20°C); average humidity is between 77 and 88%.
- Rainforests now cover less than 6% of the earth's land surface. They produce 40% of the world's oxygen. More than half of all the world's plant and animal species live in tropical rainforests.
- The Gros Piton is home to some 27 bird species, five of them found nowhere else; three indigenous rodents; one opossum; three bats; eight reptiles and three amphibians. ("The monkeys in the rainforest," our tour guide told us in scornful tones, "come from Barbados." How they got to St Lucia, she didn't reveal.)
- Some creatures endemic to St. Lucia include the St. Lucia Parrot and the rare St. Lucia Whiptail lizard (found only on the Maria Islands Nature Reserve). The St. Lucia Parrot or Jacquot (*Amazona versicolor*) is an endangered species, having been hunted down to one flock of just 100 birds; deforestation also contributed to their decline. Now thanks to work by the St. Lucia Parrot Project since 1992, with the help of Jersey Zoo, the birds have made a gradual comeback and in 2000 had increased to 500.
- The Jacquot was made St Lucia's national bird when the island became independent in 1979.

You can explore the rainforest on foot, by jeep, or bike. Or you can get up there in the canopy with the parrots. Rain Forest Sky Rides take you on a leisurely tour in a ski-lift style gondola with a knowledgeable guide and mackintoshes provided. It rides on a cable right up into the canopy, the highest part of the forest; then you burst through the trees and are greeted by a spectacular view across Choc Bay and the Martinique Channel... or you would be, if it wasn't raining. It's a fabulous hour, entertaining and beautiful; and you dry out quickly enough when you get back down to ground level.

For those with rather more adventurous (or mad) tastes, there's the Rainforest Canopy Adventure. ("I should have bought that T-shirt," my partner muttered darkly to me as we were being kitted out. He meant the one that said "Probably too old to be doing this".) Put briefly, this is abseiling. You are given a hard hat with a deeply unflattering hairnet to wear beneath it, and big gloves exactly like the one I use in the garden at home, then festooned with a complicated system of harnesses and buckles. After that you hike to the starting platform where alarmingly cheerful guides attach you to a cable by a system of pulleys, and you zoom down a series of six "glides" of increasing length and steepness. It is as exhilarating as a white-knuckle ride and wonderful fun, but you don't get to see an awful lot even if you have your eyes open. The guides may say encouragingly that you'll be taking photos once you get used to it, but most of the party were too busy hanging on with a vice-like grip to think about whipping out their cameras!

If you didn't already realise from the rugged and beautiful topography, St Lucia is a volcanic island. Indeed it boasts "the world's only drive-in volcano"! This is Sulphur Springs – and what you see is what you get, or rather, smell. It is a caldera, which continually spews sulphurous fumes from its many vents. The bad-egg reek is not as pungent as Solfatara near Naples or Rotorua in New Zealand, but it's





*Clockwise from top left: Diamond Falls, Coco Palm, the fruit man of Reduit Beach, boats by the Eagle's Nest*

Because the sea is so deep so close to shore, you don't have to travel far out to see dolphins

unmistakable. And it's also not surprising that the name of the nearby town of Soufrière, founded by the French in 1746, and the oldest official settlement on the island, means "source of sulphur".

People don't just flock to Sulphur Springs to marvel at the stinky vapours being belched out, the bubbling superheated pools or the rocks streaked with the colours of copper, iron, magnesium and zinc as well as sulphur. They go for the health benefits. The noisome steam is said to be good for arthritis and asthma, the volcanic mud to have anti-ageing properties. Elton John and David Hockney are among its fans, so you can judge for yourself how well it works. Empress Josephine, spouse of Napoleon, used to bathe in the springs while holidaying on her father's plantation. Today the less well-heeled can also enjoy a dip in pools of warm spring-water rich in therapeutic minerals – an immensely relaxing experience, even if we didn't come out 10 years younger.

Close to Sulphur Springs lie the Diamond Botanical Gardens, a tranquil spot that was once a sugar plantation. Now it is a peaceful walk through delightful planting beneath old mature cocoa, coffee and nutmeg trees: ginger lilies, begonia, orchids, vanilla vines, bougainvillea and giant scarlet Caribbean heliconia. The path meanders along the Diamond River, passing miniature gardens within the gardens, until you come to the spectacular Diamond Falls. Not amazing for their height, but for their startling colours: over the centuries, the rocks beneath the cascade have become encrusted with minerals and are now streaked in orange, yellow, green, and purple.

St Lucia's volcanic heritage not only shaped the island's magnificent scenery, it also makes the waters around it a wonderful place for sea creatures. Sadly I had a slight cough which prevented me from doing any diving, but you don't have to don scuba gear to see the best ocean denizens of all: dolphins. Just off the western shores near the Pitons, the seabed drops dramatically to depths of 3,000 feet, and it is here in the deep waters that you can keep an appointment with everyone's favourite cetaceans. Because the sea is so deep so close to shore, you don't have to travel far out to see dolphins and even whales (though we saw none that trip). It has become a popular excursion, because a close encounter with Flipper and his friends is almost guaranteed. That doesn't make it any less magical.

After a first glimpse of a small group of dolphins in the dis-

tance, the boat headed towards the depths off the Pitons, and pretty soon we started to see more. A few humped grey backs frolicking in the choppy seas increased in number, grew closer, and soon there were hundreds of them all around us, leaping, diving, swimming alongside the boat, heads popping out of the water and grinning that wide-mouthed dolphin grin. They were playing with the boat; and when another party of watchers joined us the two boats took to sailing in figures-of-eight the dolphins stayed with us for what must have been over an hour. Both humans and cetaceans had a wonderful time. I couldn't help wondering whether the dolphins get together at the same time each day and whistle to each other, "Time to go and play with the boats!"

As well as being a laid-back sort of place, there are plenty of ways to chill out still further in St Lucia. Doing tai chi with Denise and yoga with Donna wasn't part of the regular offerings at Coco Palm, where we stayed, though there is usually some such ad hoc activity on offer; but the hotel's spa offers serious delights in the way of massages, hot stone "experiences", reflexology, manicures and pedicures – in the tropical gardens, on the roof deck with its panoramic views, or even on the beach. Coco Palm's holistic month this June will be something to anticipate. It's a small and friendly hotel (its sister, Coco Kreole, just the other side of the pool, is even smaller) housed in a new, pretty colonial-style building, and the staff just can't do too much for you.

Many other hotels offer spa packages for the complete holistic experience, and some of the hotels offer daily yoga classes. Others will bring in someone to work with you, and teachers are also available for private sessions. There are also centres for holistic activities, complementary therapy and other mind- and body-rejuvenating activities. One of these, the Unihealth Institute for Holistic Therapy in Rodney Bay was, alas, closed while I was staying just down the road; but it offers Iyengar and laughter yoga, tai chi, and meditation. It also advertises aromatherapy massage, chiropractic, Ghandarva Veda (Maharashi), homeopathy, Indian head massage, meditation (guided/transcendental), naturopathy, Qi gong, rebirthing, revitalising energy treatment, reflexology, reiki, Swedish Body Massage, and the Siva Method.

Chico stayed at Coco Palm in Rodney Bay ([www.coco-resorts.com](http://www.coco-resorts.com)), flying direct to St Lucia with Virgin Airways. Virgin Holidays ([www.virginholidays.co.uk](http://www.virginholidays.co.uk)) has a special offer running from May 31-June 30 at the sister hotel, Coco Kreole, from £575. Non-discounted holidays at Coco Palm start at £759.

Tai chi classes were given by Denise of the Denise & Irma Baker & Kyle School of Dance in New York State. Denise is often to be found on the island, so it is worth contacting her ([denisegenebaker@hotmail.com](mailto:denisegenebaker@hotmail.com)).

Rainforest Sky Rides, the Rainforest Canopy Adventure, dolphin encounters and other trips are widely available.

