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St. Lucia is a family kind of place



[Photos: Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty]
Boats of all sizes are found nuzzling the shores of St. Lucia.

By ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY

© St. Petersburg Times, published April 22, 2001

From grandparents to babies, this island offers something for everyone. And the special kids' programs at many resorts keep the most restive members busy and amused while the adults play.

SOUFRIERE, St. Lucia -- A smile at breakfast works wonders.

"Hello there, mon petit," cooed Martha, our waitress, greeting 9-month-old Dillon with a broad smile. She squeezed his toes and wiggled his leg.

"Aren't you a handsome fellow?" she asked.

Dillon apparently agreed, waving his arms and drooling

bits of banana on her hand.

Sunny, Dillon's mother, hastily reached for a napkin, but Martha beamed and said approvingly, "He has a fine appetite."

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Sunny mopped up the banana, then glanced at the rest of us, together for our first breakfast in the Southern Caribbean:

Grandpa yawned and sipped his coffee. Seven-year-old Diane giggled and stuck out her tongue. Grandma reached for the cream and Uncle Steve unfolded a sightseeing map.

All was well.

Traveling with a toddler is always a challenge. But on this morning, with eight long, lovely days ahead of us, Martha seemed like a ray of sunshine. We were at

the Hilton Jalousie Resort, on St. Lucia, surrounded by the sun, sand, warm seas, tropical gardens and rain forests that earn most of the headlines on this volcanic island.

Formerly a French, then an English, colony in the Windwards, and now an independent nation, St. Lucia is just 27 by 14 miles. It seems to be populated by residents who love everyone's children.

Everyone who spied Dillon's gap-toothed grin -- Mathilde the spice vendor, Peter the dining room waiter, Manda the plantation tour guide -- stopped to smile and chuck him under his chubby chin.



A trip to an outdoor market can net tourists fresh cinnamon sticks, cloves and bags of cardamom.

Tropical island lures

Drawing adults away from the shore or snorkeling is the opportunity to buy fresh cinnamon sticks and bags of cardamom and cloves in the market at Castries, the capital city. Or they can tour the restored slave quarters at historic Morne Coubaril Plantation and watch old Guillaume, in cut-offs and a frayed straw hat, "dance" on bins of cocoa beans to polish them.

There is always time to stroll the narrow streets of Soufriere, St. Lucia's first capital, founded by French colonists in 1746. Climb the hill to the volcano's bubbling mudpots and steaming sulphur vents, evidence that the forces which created St. Lucia's two landmark volcanic peaks, Grand and Petit Pitons, are still active.

But then there is the chance plop into a beach chair under a palm tree to order a rum punch.

At some family resorts here, the children's programs are little more than enthusiastic child care. But Jalousie Resort recently expanded and remodeled its facilities, adding a Children's Learning Center, hiring trained staff and introducing a weekly program. (The resort has also opened a full-service spa and a complete fitness center.)

Child care for those ages 5 and older and a special activities program for older children are free; some choices, such as lunch, tennis lessons and field trips, cost extra. When enrollment is low, as it was during our stay, the staff makes an exception and takes outgoing 3- and 4-year-olds.

Still, Dillon was too young to attend (babysitters are available for \$7 a hour). But Diane, 7, loved having a special place to go and enjoyed the activities, which went beyond crafts and games. The volcano field trips, rainforest walks and tidepool adventures topped her list of favorites.

Meanwhile, we swam in the pool and at the beach and snorkeled in the National Marine Preserve at the base of the Grand and Petit Pitons, at either end of Jalousie Bay. The marine park begins next to the resort.

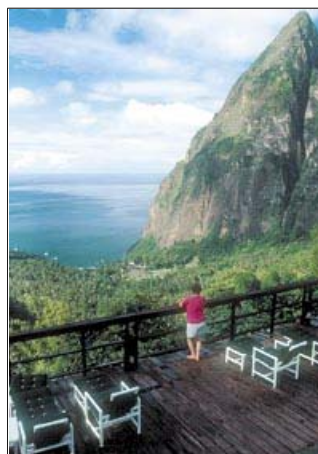
We also toured Morne Coubaril Plantation, where cocoa beans are still harvested, and hiked up 3,145-foot Mount Gimie, St. Lucia's highest peak.

Many visitors rent cars to explore the island, though many of the narrow roads are among the Western Hemisphere's worst, riddled with potholes and poorly signposted. Tourist hotels can arrange taxi and tour vans for those who do not want to drive.

At the resorts

We made time to relax at Jalousie, a former French sugar plantation, on 325 acres of private cove, sandy beach and secluded valley. The resort is gated and, its topography reveals, is the edge of a volcanic crater.

"We went out in a sailboat and tried to measure the depth a



few years ago," said Jalousie spokesman Stuart Freeman. "Our last reading, about 100 feet offshore, measured 325 feet before it went off the charts. We never did find the bottom. That's why the water is that lovely dark-blue water color."

The 114-unit hotel consists of the Great House, a small guest-room annex and 102 cottages scattered over the hillside. The Great House, a two-story, plantation-style mansion, has winding staircases, high ceilings, colonial furnishings and broad porches. The largest property of its kind on the southern half of the island, it's often used for government receptions and to host visiting dignitaries.

The pool, patio cafe, beach bar, Children's Center and water sports shack are close to the beach. The cottages, tucked under mango and breadfruit trees and coconut palms, have one, two or three rooms with modern bathrooms, plantation shutters and flowery fabrics. Each has its own plunge pool and patio.

The cottages have air conditioning but no window screens; as in so many tropical destinations, local builders apparently expect guests to prefer closed windows.

We spent the last two days of our vacation in north St. Lucia, at Windjammer Landing on Labrelotte Bay. Windjammer, a busy mass-market resort often booked by tour operators, caters specifically to families with children of all ages.

Driving north along the coast is slow going, on winding roads that follow the mountains' contours, through the village of Soufriere (the capital during the French occupation), and through Castries, the present capital and a busy cruise port.

Beyond Castries, the land widens gently, bordered by low hills and broad bays, with miles of gold sand beaches, each seemingly fronted by its own resort. Windjammer is often booked for vacation packages. The free children's program was packed with activities. Babies and toddlers are also welcome but must be accompanied by an adult.

Like Jalousie, Windjammer's restaurants and shops are beside the beach and guest accommodations are in rows of one- and two-bedroom stucco villas that climb the hill.

The design ensures both privacy and panoramic ocean views, but moves the villas far from the beach and the restaurants. It is a nice walk down, but a hike back up, so the resort provides shuttle transportation.

Our villa had spacious rooms, a private pool and best of all, an equipped kitchen, making it more affordable for a family and an ideal choice for a longer stay.

Diane immediately made friends, mostly with children from British families, for whom St. Lucia is a popular winter destination. And there were so many toddlers like Dillon that the resort had to scramble to find enough high chairs.

* * *

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are freelance writers who live in Marina del Rey, Calif.

If you go

GETTING THERE:

American Airlines flies to St. Lucia directly from Miami or through San Juan, Puerto Rico. The flight from Miami is direct but flies in the evening. If your first leg arrives late, you may miss your connection, forcing an overnight in Miami.

Alternatively, flying through San Juan gives you a choice of several daily flights. Air Jamaica and Air Canada also fly to St. Lucia.

If you're staying at either Jalousie,

Ladera or Anse Chastenet, on the southwest coast, you can fly to either Vigie Airport (near Castries) or Hewanora Airport (on the island's south end). If you're staying at Windjammer, on the northwest coast, fly to Vigie.

ISLAND FACTS: If you like to explore, don't want to eat all your meals at the hotel and are willing to drive English-style (on the left-hand side of the road) consider renting a car. Signs are rare, but traffic is light outside of Castries and local residents are happy to give directions.

Most sellers accept U.S. dollars and Eastern Caribbean



Times art

dollars, but prices are sometimes better with the latter. For general information on sightseeing, contact the St. Lucia Tourist Board at 800 Second Ave., Suite 400-J, New York, NY 10017; call toll-free 1-888-478-LUCIA.

STAYING THERE: Jalousie Hilton Resort has 102 individual cottages and 12 "Sugar Mill" guest rooms. Most sports, activities and the Children's Learning Center are free. Children 17 and under stay free with their parents.

Cottage prices per night start at \$300 in mid-season (April 17-May 28 and Oct. 30-Dec. 17); and \$210 in low season (May 29-Oct. 29). Call (758) 459-7666 or Hilton, toll-free at 1-800-HILTONS. Members of Hilton's Honors Club get significant discounts.

Windjammer Landing Resort has one- and two-bedroom villas with full kitchens. Restaurants, pool area, reception and tennis courts are at the beach. Children 5 and older are welcome at the free Children's Center. Daily activities include field trips, swimming, sports and games.

One-bedroom villas start at \$280 a night. Call the resort toll-free at 1-800 743-9609.



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