

Flying visit to Dominica

Judy Bastyra takes us on a 48-hour tour of the Nature Isle.

Day one:

11:00 Peering out of the aircraft window as we touchdown at Melville Hall Airport in the North of Dominica, I am, as always, awed by the striking view of majestic mountains rising up before me along the rugged coastline. I can't wait to start exploring, so as soon as the taxi arrives we head down south along the east coast road.

I haven't eaten anything since last night and, as I know Pagua Bay Bar is only 10 minutes from the airport, I decide to stop in and say 'hi' to the owners, Rick and Alica, and treat myself to their glazed Mahi Mahi, (one of the specialities on their menu), washed down with a light and mild Kubuli beer. Sitting on the restaurant's magnificent outdoor deck, I soak up the sweeping views across the bay.

12:30 After my delicious brunch, I venture a little further south into the Carib Territory – home to just over 2000 Caribs (also known as Kalinago), the Caribbean's indigenous people. On the way to the Territory I pass by Frederick Daniel, who bakes cassava bread in his traditional Carib bakery by the side of the road at Pointe Salibia. He used to be a farmer but decided that he wanted to preserve some of the Carib traditions and so, 16 years ago, set himself up as a baker. You will find him there every day from about 11am making fresh, hot coconut and cassava bread. At the Kalinago Barana Aute (the Carib Cultural Village), I venture into the Karbet to enjoy a mesmerising performance of traditional song and dance, before observing the art of canoe construction, pottery making and carib cooking, and conversing with the resident Caribs about their fascinating history.

14:00 Continuing South I arrive at Beau Rive, a quaint plantation-style hotel situated on a thickly forested hillside between the villages of Castle Bruce and Sineku. This 10-bedroom hotel features elegant white wooden fretwork and mahogany floors, which seamlessly blend colonial British style with local Caribbean charm. Upstairs in the stylish dining room a grand piano stands surrounded by framed music scores on the wall.

15:00 From Beau Rive I venture inland through the lush vegetation of Morne Trois Pitons National Park and after a 20-minute walk between towering trees, wooden steps bring me to the Emerald Pool. It is a truly breathtaking sight. Its shimmering waters are cooled by a cascading waterfall. Diving into the fresh water I feel the aches in my muscles ebb away.

16:30 It now seems a long time since brunch so I head further south to Citrus Creek Plantation in La Plaine, where I stop for an espresso coffee and a sumptuously soft chocolate cake at Riverside Café. It is a stone lodge where Patricia Charpentier, the charming French chef, serves up a menu full of the freshest of ingredients, picked from her organic garden. After we chat I take a stroll through the glorious gardens and check out her mosaics.

17:40 Revived by coffee and cake I embark on another mini-trek inland to Victoria Falls with the help of a guide. The trek is quite hard work, over slippery rocks, but the breathtaking view when we arrive makes it all worth it. The Victoria Falls cascade into a milky mineral-rich pool below. After drying off, my guide leads me south along more twisty trails, to a dirt road where we get a lift to the village of Stowe.

19:00 Feeling tired after my day's adventuring I head to Zandoli Inn. With just five immaculately kept bedrooms, Zandoli, which is owned and run by mother and daughter team, Linda Hyland and Jen Andreoli, has an informal and friendly atmosphere, a world away from faceless hotel chains. A delicious dinner is served at 7pm and, dining at a large table with the other guests, I couldn't feel more at home, especially after one or two of Jen's knee-weakening watermelon daiquiris.

24:00 Comfortably full, I drift off in my simply furnished room with its blue painted wood work and jalousie-shuttered windows, listening to the sea lapping in the bay below.

Day two:

08:30 I wake to discover that Jennifer's laid on an appetising breakfast of fresh fruit and home-made bread and muffins. She is an amazing cook.

09:00 Before it gets too hot, I take on the first section of the Wai'tukubuli National Trail from Scots Head to Soufriere. The trail begins with a long, steep climb to the top of a ridge with a spectacular view of the dense forest and Caribbean Sea below. From here the trail markers direct me to a beautiful open meadow-like area. Soon I begin to smell sulphur, so I follow my nose to the Soufriere Sulphur Springs and treat myself to a short soak in the warm water.

12:30 I follow the coast round to Castle Comfort, stopping at The Whale Research Centre at the Anchorage Marine Mammal Interpretation Centre to talk to Andrew Armour who has become famous as 'the whale whisperer'. Here I see the Caribbean's only full-size mounted skeleton of a beached female Sperm Whale, and I chat to a troop of excited whale watchers preparing to go out in search of the magnificent creatures, on a tour that will last from 2pm to dusk.

13:00 Ravenous after our morning's excursion we stop for lunch at Pearl's Cuisine in the heart of Roseau. This colonial-style restaurant is truly charming. I sit on the balcony overlooking bustling King George street, which gives me the perfect opportunity to do a spot of people-watching, whilst enjoying a meal of Callaloo soup with crab and provisions, washed down with a glass of freshly squeezed tamarind juice.

15:00 Heading north again, I stop off at Tiffany's art gallery. I first met Tiffany, who is an accomplished artist, when she and her parents were running their restaurant La Robe Creole. Sadly, this has since closed down, but at her gallery you will be able to sample some of her mother's fantastic cakes and candies, as well as homemade plantain and cassava chips from their estate.

15:30 I travel north to Portsmouth and take a boat trip down the Indian River, one of the locations where Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest was filmed. It has an other-worldly feeling with its moss-covered mangrove trees whose buttress roots can spread up to 20ft along the banks of the dark green waters. Be aware that to access the river you need to buy a pass (which includes the services of a guide) from the Visitor's Centre in Portsmouth.

17:00 Next I visit the 260-acre Cabrits National Park, where the 18th Century Fort Shirley is being restored under the guidance of well-known Dominican artist and historian Dr. Lennox Honeychurch. As I gaze at Morne Diablotin from the ramparts, I am transported back in time to the bloody historic battles that were fought between the French and British for this beautiful island.

19:00 I arrive at Iguana Cafe, run by Jennifer and Cartouche. Rustic and rasta, they serve a sumptuous local lobster or crayfish meal with couscous, steamed green pawpaw, salad and rice and peas. There's a large menu to choose from, but be warned, although it may look just like a shack, it can be very pricey though the food is delicious. (Tel: 767 2772 535 bookings are essential)

22:00 Once again I fall into bed happily worn-out. Set amongst mature Samaan and coconut trees, Picard Beach Cottages are the perfect home-from-home for the weary traveller. My spacious beachfront wooden cottage is full of home comforts, so I brew myself a cup of local organic herbal tea in my kitchenette and head out to the private verandah to watch the sun set behind Morne Diablotin – the tallest mountain on the island. A stroll along the beach, then I head off to bed, happy but wishing that there were more hours in the day!

FACT BOX

• Location: Between Guadeloupe to the North and Martinique to the South • Size: 751 sq. km (approx. 290 sq. miles) • Language: English is the official language of Dominica, but many people speak Kweyol – a mix of French, Carib and West African indigenous languages. Some northern villages speak an English dialect called Kokoy. • Currency: Eastern Caribbean dollar (EC\$). • Departure tax: There is an EC\$59 departure tax when leaving the island. You must have this in cash prior to arriving at the airport.