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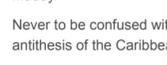
Dominica, the hidden jewel of the Caribbean

Dominica is a paradise for hikers - and a joy for those who love the Caribbean at its quietest, says Nigel Tisdall



Hidden attraction: Dominica is one of the Caribbean's less known destinations, but has a remote beauty. Photo: AP

By **Nigel Tisdall**
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When Anthony Trollope sailed through the Caribbean in 1856 he declared Dominica to be "the most picturesque of all the islands," and noted down "an ardent desire to be off and rambling among those green mountains."

Sadly his schedule didn't permit this, but it's precisely why I've landed on this colossal conference of volcanic peaks armed with hiking boots, insect repellent and an expectation that things could get extremely wet and muddy.

Never to be confused with the Dominican Republic, Dominica is the antithesis of the Caribbean holiday cliché.

It is almost twice the size of Barbados, but has very few white sand beaches, no major international airport, no all-inclusive resorts and only gets a modest attention from the cruise-ship circus. Sandwiched between Guadeloupe and Martinique, it is just a 30-minute flight south of Antigua.

And while that popular island boasts that it has a beach for every day of the year, lesser-known Dominica proudly responds that it has just as many rivers.

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island, ranging from Mark Steele, a genial English musician who self-built the ten-room Beau Rive near Castle Bruce, "starting with a cutlass and a cow," to Gregor Nassief, a Dominican businessman who spent 17 years negotiating to buy the 4.5 acres of coast overlooking Prince Rupert Bay where the five-star villas of Secret Bay now sit in exclusive splendour.

Interactive: [Dominica travel map](#)

Life here has always suited the independent-minded. In the 17th and 18th centuries, as the French and English battled for control of the Caribbean, Dominica became a last refuge for the indigenous Caribs. "The island was meant to stay neutral," explains local historian Lennox Honychurch, "but the fortunes to be made from sugar were too great."

Dominica – the Switzerland of the Caribbean?

Well, it has the mountains, but not the mindset. In 1763 the British took over. Now Dominicans drive on the left, use British-style plugs and have relatives in Neasden, but the map is still sprinkled with Gallic memories. Fond St Jean, La Haut, Morne aux Diabes...

Thanks to a foresighted administrator, in 1903 the last of the Caribs were given a 3,700-acre reserve which survives today as the Kalinago Territory, visitors welcome. Out of a community of 3,500 residents some 500 still have pure blood, including Fatina Sirena, who guides me round an interpretative centre explaining their history and lifestyle. Her high cheekbones are clear signs of an Amerindian ancestry, and it is heartening to learn how traditional skills such as making canoes from gummier trees, weaving reed baskets and using bush medicine have survived.

The Carib word for Dominica, Waitukubuli, meaning "tall is her body", now headlines a 155-mile national trail that runs the length of the island. It would take two weeks to walk in full, so most visitors just tackle various sections graded from easy to advanced. Along with diving, hiking is a chief reason to come to Dominica. Challenges include a six-hour round trip to the steaming Boiling Lake in Morne Trois Pitons National Park, and an ascent of Morne Diablotin, the island's highest point at 4,747ft. Its summit is usually capped with mist but if, like me, you suffer from conquering syndrome, it is a rewarding work-out.

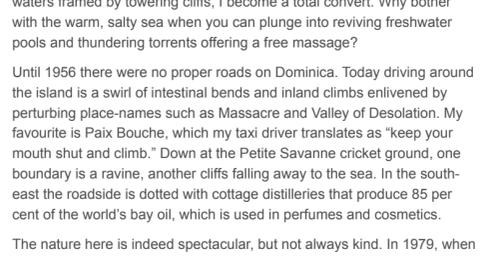


Take the long road: Dominica has splendid hiking trails (Photo: AP)

Most hikes soon become a hot and dirty scramble, and it's worth visiting at least one of the island's monumental waterfalls. After a 90-minute hike to Victoria Falls, clambering over boulders and sloshing through rushing waters framed by towering cliffs, I became a total convert. Why bother with the warm, salty sea when you can plunge into reviving freshwater pools and thundering torrents offering a free massage?

Until 1956 there were no proper roads on Dominica. Today driving around the island is a swirl of intestinal bends and inland climbs enlivened by perturbing place-names such as Massacre and Valley of Desolation. My favourite is Paix Bouche, which my taxi driver translates as "keep your mouth shut and climb." Down at the Petite Savanne cricket ground, one boundary is a ravine, another cliffs falling away to the sea. In the south-east the roadside is dotted with cottage distilleries that produce 85 per cent of the world's bay oil, which is used in perfumes and cosmetics.

The nature here is indeed spectacular, but not always kind. In 1979, when Hurricane David swept through, it left three-quarters of the population homeless.



Wet and wild: Victoria Falls is one of the key sights in the interior (Photo: AP)

The terrifying force of its 150mph winds is made clear in the Botanical Gardens in the capital, Roseau, where a yellow school bus lies crushed beneath a massive baobab. No one was injured, but the wreckage has become an essential sight when touring this ramshackle port of dilapidated wooden buildings and colonial leftovers, which include the Caribbean's last-standing barracoen used for holding slaves.

Rum fans will be pleased to know that a distillery, Macoucherie, still survives, using island-grown sugar cane. Drop into Francis Enterprises, which also sells motorcycle tyres and cooking oil, and you can sip some poured straight from the barrel for EC\$2 (50p) a tot.

Roseau, frankly, could do with a little rescuing. Amongst its crumbling buildings is the house, now in private hands, where the author Jean Rhys, best know for her novel Wide Sargasso Sea, lived as a child.



Landmark: Roseau Cathedral rears over the rest of the capital (Photo: AP)

Last year marked the 25th anniversary of her death and in other countries (Switzerland springs to mind) there would have been reverential museum and literary events to enjoy. As compensation, I wander along to Roseau's splendid wooden Carnegie Library, built in 1907 with a wraparound veranda to breathe in the sea breezes. Today it is full of uniformed schoolchildren dutifully doing their homework, with a little smartphone activity under the table.

Rhys left Dominica at the age of 17, but her writings are infused with memories of the island, with its "hills like clouds and clouds like fantastic hills," and the "treacherous, tremendous sea."

While much of the Caribbean has been overwhelmed by cruising, luxury hotels, golf and real estate, this is an island that still has its own moods and character.

And surprises, as I find when I go snorkelling at Champagne Reef in the Soufrière Scott's Head Marine Reserve. Here I see puffer fish, fan corals and a wreck. But what makes this extra-special are the myriad streams of bubbles rising from the seabed, the result of subterranean geothermal springs. As I roll around in this enchanting fizz, having my own Hollywood moment, it is a joy to be on a Caribbean island still rich with secrets.

Essentials

Getting there

British Airways ([ba.com](#)) flies from London Gatwick to Antigua, from £441 return. From there Liat ([liat.com](#)) has flights to Dominica, from £104 return. You can also get there with the same airline, flying via Barbados.

Packages

Specialists include Motmot Travel ([motmottravel.com](#)), Tropic Breeze ([tropicbreeze.co.uk](#)) and Western & Oriental ([westernoriental.com](#)). KE Adventure ([keadventure.com](#)) offers small group walking tours.

When to go

The three months between February to April see the least rainfall. Visit between December and April to spot whales, March to September for turtles.

Key events are Carnival (February 16-17), Dive Fest in July and the World Creole Music Festival in late October.

Getting around

A six-hour island tour with a local driver cost around \$40 (£26) per person, based on four sharing, excluding admission fees and tip. Island Car Rentals ([islandcar.dm](#)) has vehicles from \$41 (£27) per day.

Where to stay

Ten minutes' from the airport, American-run Pagua Bay House (001 767 445 8888; [paguabayhouse.com](#)) makes a welcoming first base, with six well-appointed cabanas, including two suites. There is a restaurant and pool overlooking the bay. Minimum stay three nights, from \$240 (£160) per night.

Jungle Bay (446 1789; [junglebaydominica.com](#)) is a good choice for an active, one-stop holiday with a daily programme that includes excursions, hikes, cooking classes and spa treatments. The 35 rustic-luxe cabins feature locally-made furniture. There is also a restaurant, a pool and a yoga studio. Prices from \$257 (£171) with breakfast.

The island's most luxurious hideaway, Secret Bay (445 4444; [secretbay.dm](#)) has four contemporary villas set on concrete stilts, plus two bungalows, tucked away on a private headland. Minimum stay five nights, meals are served in-room, from \$585 (£389) per night.

Where to eat

French-owned Riverside Café (001 767 446 1234; [citruscreekplantation.com](#)), near La Plaine, is a good choice for lunch or a snack while touring – go for local dishes such as callaloo soup and smoked fish quiche.

Close to the much-visited Trafalgar Falls, Papillote Wilderness Retreat (448 2287; [papillote.dm](#)) serves excellent Caribbean fare including mahimahi steamed in a banana leaf and fruit cake with rum.

Attracting both locals and visitors, Old Stone Grill (440 7549) is a homely affair in Castle Street, Roseau, with a menu that includes grilled tuna, curried goat and international dishes.

What to do

See [waitukubulitrail.com](#) for information on walking trails. Guides and transport can be arranged through your hotel, or see [khattstours.com](#).

Extreme Dominica ([extremedominica.com](#)) offers canyoning adventures, for diving and whalewatching contact the Anchorage Hotel ([anchoragehotel.dm](#)). Snorkelling at Champagne Reef ([champagnereef.com](#)) costs \$19 (£13), including a guide and equipment – choose a day when there are no visiting cruise ships.

Key sights while touring the island include the Kalinago Territory ([kalinagoterritory.com](#)), the restored military site of Fort Shirley, and the historic centre of Roseau – pick up a walking tour map from Cocoricó ([cocoricocafe.com](#)).

More information

St Lucia & Dominica (Footprint; £7.99) covers the island. London-based Papillote Press ([papillotepress.co.uk](#)) publishes books on Dominica.

For tourist information see [discoverdominica.com](#).

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