



ST. LUCIA

beyond the pitons

You've heard about its majestic Pitons and the world's only drive-in volcano—and yes, these certainly are impressive attractions. But visitors returning to St. Lucia will be even more impressed with the island—and your travel planning skills—if they experience the “off the beaten path” wonders that many tourists miss.

ciara lavelle

The **Saint Lucia Tourist Board's** Ian Herman, marketing manager for niche markets, maps out his home's most exciting (and least visited) events, activities and attractions.

go local

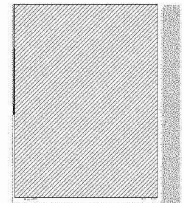
To get the true St. Lucian experience, Herman says, go where the locals are. Exploring outside of the tourist hub of Soufriere will bring clients to “villages like Laborie, which are unique attractions,” he explains. “You can see traditional crafts being made—see the weaving of the baskets, and other craft items.” Because of Laborie's location in the south, he continues, Soufriere resorts like **Anse Chastanet** are your best bet for arranging tours, meeting the artisans and even, in some cases, learning their skills. “That,” he says, “is uniquely St. Lucian.”

In fact, Anse Chastanet is a great hub for island explorers of any

kind, with excursions ranging from whale watching and deep-sea fishing to day trips to the Grenadine islands by plane. Guests here can also tour the ruins of a plantation within the resort grounds, or go ziplining through the treetops. And foodies can see exactly where their meals come from during visits to the resort's organic farm in the Soufriere hills.

Anse Chastanet's *Amazing Adventure* package includes meals, airport transfers, accommodations and a variety of activities including scuba diving, jungle biking, boat snorkeling trips, guided walks and hikes throughout the resort's estate, and a hike in the rainforest. The 7-night package starts at \$6,149 per room dbl.

Nearby **Ladera** offers guests a spectacular view in addition to convenient access to undiscovered treasures. Set high in the mountains,





its rooms are built in 3-wall style, with an open "fourth wall" looking out between the peaks of the Pitons—truly one of the most spectacular vistas on the island. From here, clients can take a tour of a local Saturday morning market; stroll through a botanical garden with the resort's expert gardener; and even learn a new recipe alongside the resort's culinary team. (Ladera's Dasheene restaurant is itself an unmissable off-the-beaten-path attraction, serving up succulent Caribbean specialties on a balcony offering the same stunning view as its rooms.)

The resort is offering a 3-night *A Great Escape* package that includes a tour of the sulphur springs, the volcano, botanical gardens and Toraille waterfall, among other amenities. Rates from April 10 to June 30, start at \$2,695 sgl/dbl for a *Petit Piton Suite with Plunge Pool*.

And yes, viewing the Pitons in the south are a must, but, Herman points out, the north has its own treasures. At Grande Anse Beach, Herman describes, "there is a tremendous opportunity for turtle watching. During the months of July to November, greenback turtles are coming up at night.... They come ashore to lay their eggs." Visitors can witness the phenomenon on tours through **St. Lucia Heritage Tours**, which organizes small group overnight camping on the undeveloped beach near the village of Desbarras. It's a rustic, unforgettable experience, Herman says, made even more convenient with a stay in the northern tourist town of Rodney Bay Village. Set in the heart of the village, the **Coco Palm** offers clients even more island experiences with its *Explore St. Lucia* package, including four nights in a garden-view room; breakfast for two; dinner and wine for two; a trip to the nearby

Anse La Raye Fish Fry; a tour of Soufriere via catamaran, including the drive-in volcano and botanical gardens; a snorkeling day trip; and a rum factory tour. Rates start at \$3,035 per room dbl. Regular room rates start at \$125 per room per night.

And that's just one way to experience the island's hidden natural attractions, Herman continues. Though the Pitons have made hiking one of St. Lucia's most popular sports, it's but one of a handful of ways to immerse yourself in nature here. "There are also the ATV trails, which take you along some of the more secluded beaches in the south," Herman describes, noting that horseback riding tours through the trails are also popular. "Either way, you're hardly likely to see more than three or four persons on any of the beaches they take you to," he explains.

Herman points to **Coconut Bay Beach Resort & Spa** as a top hub for ATV and horseback riding activities. The resort is especially family friendly, with a water park on its grounds and an extensive kids' club schedule that includes gifts, games and visits from the resort's cartoon coconut mascots, Coco and Loco. But one side of the resort is reserved for adults only, catering both to parents who've left their kids at the kids' club for the day, as well as couples in search of a relaxing, romantic atmosphere. Both markets can sign up for the resort's *Honeymoon Beach ATV* tour, a 3-hour trip along the island's Atlantic coastline, passing mangroves, private estates and plantations, mud pits and more. There's also a stop along the way for a quick dip in the ocean. Tour rates start at \$90 per bike; regular all-inclusive rates at Coconut Bay start at \$469 per room per night dbl. ▶▶



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Coco Palm offers easy access to the island's northern treasures.

party time

Like most Caribbean islands, locals in St. Lucia love to party—and when it comes to visitors to their island, the more, the merrier. This island is home to some of the Caribbean's biggest celebrations, Herman says, and visitors taking part will come away with unforgettable memories of music, food and fun.

One of the biggest events here is *St. Lucia Jazz*, a music festival that celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Running from April 30 to May 8, this year's lineup brings some of the world's biggest performers to St. Lucia, including R&B star John Legend and jazz saxophonist Maceo Parker. But there's plenty of local flavor in this year's acts, too, with six main stage acts calling St. Lucia home, playing everything from jazz to reggae to steel pans.

The event is held at Pigeon Island National Park, just minutes from the **Sandals Grande St. Lucian Spa & Beach Resort**. From here, clients can easily access the festival, as well as Pigeon Island's historical attractions like Fort Rodney; and *Sandals Stay at 1 – Play at 3 Exchange* program provides transfers and access to the all-inclusive amenities at the other two Sandals properties in St. Lucia (**Sandals La Toc** and **Sandals Halcyon Beach**) free of charge. Rates at the Sandals Grande St. Lucian start at \$580 pp per night.

Jouen Kweyol, or Creole Day, is another major event on the island. The standout aspect of this festival, Herman says, is the cuisine. "It's nothing imported, really local stuff made the old fashioned way," he explains. "You have bread as it was made in the past. There are really, really tasty dishes, not using any of the artificial flavor they have now." *Jouen Kweyol* is celebrated in towns all across the island on the last

Sunday in October. (This year, the celebration takes place Oct. 30.)

Clients who can't travel during these annual events shouldn't despair, Herman continues, because, "Every weekend, there are street parties in St. Lucia." One of the most popular is the fish fry at Anse la Raye, a seafood village set on the island's western side. Locals and tourists alike gather here on a weekly basis to dig into fresh seafood dishes like fish cakes and fried catch-of-the-day. "On Saturday night," he continues, "a similar party takes place in the town of Dennery in the east." Many St. Lucian resorts, including Anse Chastanet and Coco Palm, provide transfers to the weekly parties. It's a great opportunity for visitors to mingle with locals, Herman explains, and to soak up the culture of the island in its food, music and overall ambiance. But picky eaters beware, he cautions: "It's a strictly seafood diet." ■

Archived related articles (available on recommend.com):

Lasting Love in St. Lucia (December 2010)

Saint Lucia Travel Agent Specialist Program (edu.recommend.com)

Ladera, a Stunning St. Lucian Retreat (June 2010)

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Heritage Tours: (758) 458-1454; heritagetoursstlucia.org

Ladera: (666) 290-0978; ladera.com

Sandals Resorts: (888) SANDALS; sandals.com