

Climb every mountain...
The magnificent Pitons are a friendly presence over Soufrière

FEED THE SENSES

There are island paradises – and there's Saint Lucia. Everything you see, hear, smell, touch and taste will bring pleasure, says Leo Bear, because this Caribbean destination is a sensory delight

With its sun-soaked volcanic beaches, A-list rainforest retreats and jumping street parties, it's no wonder Saint Lucia ranks in endless 'best islands in the world' hotlists. To fully appreciate all that it has to offer, it's necessary to engage all five senses: to feel the powdery sand between your toes, to inhale the fresh sea air, to listen to the rush of waterfalls, to taste the local rum splashed over ice and, above all, to admire the extraordinary scenery.

Situated in the eastern Caribbean, Saint Lucia is the largest of the Windward Islands (measuring 27 miles by 14 miles). A helicopter tour is the best way to see its most striking features: circle around the southwest corner of the island, a mountainous area blanketed in rainforest, and you'll take in the full splendour of the world-famous Pitons. These twin precipitous rocky giants rise from the cobalt ocean just off the coastline like mythological lucky charms mislaid by Greek goddesses. Book the right hotel room and you'll awaken to the magnificent Pitons enshrouded in mist.

Most of the landscape surrounding the Pitons is dense with rainforest. Giant ficus trees and red cedars draped with vines rise above tropical plants and flowering heliconias. The whole area is a World Heritage site, with hefty protection measures in place to ensure development is limited to a handful of eco-friendly resorts. This makes the south a paradise for nature-lovers. The stunning scenery is also a draw for couples seeking seclusion. Forget high-rise hotels – rooms are private villas shrouded in lush greenery to preserve the natural beauty of the area. Outdoor rainfall showers, private plunge pools and oversized daybeds come as standard and, for a premium, you get panoramic views of the Pitons.

At Jade Mountain, guests are completely immersed in nature. From the moment they check in to the eco-resort, a cacophony of cicadas and bird calls fills the air – and it only gets louder at night when the tree frogs start croaking. Owner/architect Nick Troubetzkoy carved the hotel out of a rockface overlooking Piton Bay and, rather than hoist tonnes of glass up the mountain, he chose to leave all ▶

the suites completely open to the elements. The whole estate, which encompasses Anse Chastanet, another resort owned by Troubetzkoy, is a staggering architectural achievement and the land, which spans 600 acres, boasts 12 miles of biking trails, two sheltered bays and the remains of an old sugar plantation.

Follow the coast road south through the quaint harbourside town of Soufrière to arrive at Sugar Beach, a new Viceroy property fast gaining celebrity status. Gwyneth Paltrow and Matt Damon are among the Hollywood elite who have checked in recently. Formerly the Jalousie Plantation, accommodation offers traditional colonial good looks and wraparound wooden decks. But thanks to quirky pieces of modern art and sculptures, many of which have been plucked from owner Roger Myers' private collection, it's the communal areas that really sing.

For something more discreet, Ladera, a relatively unknown boutique hotel perched high above Sugar Beach, has 32 suites and a superb restaurant serving modern Caribbean fare.

Eating out is great fun in southern Saint Lucia. There may not be a huge number of restaurants to choose from, but they are all excellent. At Orlando's, expect fantastic creole cuisine bursting with fresh local flavours – Orlando is considered to be one of the best chefs on the island. Or for something quick and simple, Martha will rustle up spiced jerk chicken or grilled kingfish at her roadside restaurant Martha's Tables.

Those with a healthy appetite for adventure won't be disappointed by the south either. You can slather yourself in natural mud, bathe in hot Sulphur Springs or zipline through the rainforest canopy. Should you wish to learn a new skill, why not try your hand at chocolate making? Master chocolatier Hotel Chocolat owns 140 acres next to the springs and offers daily classes. Choose the 'Bean to Bar' experience and you'll be handed a pestle and mortar, cocoa nibs, butter and sugar and put through your paces. You can also stay on the 14-room property or grab a meal in Boucan, Hotel Chocolat's delightful open-air restaurant. Your tastebuds will thank you for it.



All in the best possible taste
Plump, juicy scallops are typical modern Caribbean fare. Below: a couples treatment cabana at Sugar Beach, a Viceroy Resort

To work off the calories, hike along the Tet Paul trail to view Petit Piton from a different standpoint. Or, if you have the muscle, the climb to the top of Gros Piton is an exhilarating if gruelling three-hour ascent. Despite the apparent aridity of the peaks, they are actually very biodiverse, with more than 250 native species of flora documented in the last decade. Conquer the Piton and you are certain to feel a heightened sense of awareness.

Alternatively, a visit to the spa can inject renewed energy. Age-old

remedies and locally sourced oils are used to pamper guests in a number of the five-star resorts (the Bamboo Massage at Sugar Beach's Rainforest Spa is highly recommended). Although little can beat relaxing on a sunlounger with a Piton beer in hand, listening to the waves and watching fishing boats glide past. The beaches in the south are truly spectacular: long swathes of dark volcanic sand that glitter in the sun fringed by palm trees. Anse Chastanet, to name one, is regularly quoted as one of the best beaches in the world.

In contrast, many beaches in the north are picture-postcard crescents of bright white sand (much cooler under foot). Tourists have long flocked to these shores to make the most of the excellent sailing conditions and year-round good weather. The north is also home to the capital of Saint Lucia, Castries, which is great for shopping. But it's Rodney Bay that is the true entertainment hub of the island. Here, roads are lined with restaurants, bars, shopping malls and, most recently, a casino. Delirius, a bar that is a Rodney Bay institution, is the brainchild of Alva Preville, an award-winning mixologist who zips from side to side of the bar on a library ladder. Cocktails such as Angostura Papaya Punch, Liquid Cocaine and Fizzy Flowery Melon might be packed with zesty local fruits but are not to be underestimated.

Rodney Bay is also considered one of the Caribbean's leading centres for yachting and sport fishing. The marina offers yachters 232 slips and a 4.5-acre boatyard, as well as excellent berths for mega yachts up to 200 feet. Visit during the ARC (Atlantic Rally for Cruisers) – which starts in Gran Canaria in November and ends in Rodney Bay in December – and there are events every night open to the public.

But it's not all boat parties and late-night drinking in the north. In a rural area to the east of Castries, you can sign up for a Lushan Country Life Tour, a guided trip through a patch of rainforest that includes fragrant medicinal gardens. Pigeon Island also provides tranquility. No longer an actual island due to a causeway built in the 70s, the tiny area is now a national park crisscrossed with walking trails. Hike to the top of a hill and while you inhale the fresh sea air you'll discover the ruins of Fort Rodney, a military outpost built by the British in the 18th century. For a different sensory



Sands of time
Pigeon Island National Park is a living museum of Saint Lucia's rich history

Many beaches in the north are picture-postcard crescents of bright white sand

experience that's also unmissable, each May, Pigeon Island hosts the last few days of the Saint Lucia Jazz & Arts Festival, the Caribbean's longest running jazz event.

Pigeon Island is also blessed with some of the prettiest unspoilt beaches on the island. This year for the first time, visitors can sign up for Snuba, a cross between snorkelling and scuba-diving that doesn't require a PADI certificate. Joseph (aka Blue Marlin) from Sea Adventures Inc gives a short demonstration guiding groups into the depths to see peacock flounders, octopus, arrow crabs and puffer fish in their natural habitat. For snorkellers who are considering scuba diving, this is a perfect introduction to a life aquatic and just another way to lift your senses in Saint Lucia.

Of course there's no shortage of hotels near Rodney Bay, The Landings is a favourite for its private marina and generous stretch of beach. But, for something smaller and more boutique, Cap Maison is the place to book. With rustic Spanish-colonial

architecture, its two- and three-storey villas draped in sweet-smelling jasmine and bougainvillea are some of the most sought after rooms in the north. Many come with private pools and roof terraces overlooking a small but perfectly formed golden beach, where a new restaurant, The Naked Fisherman, starts serving this season.

Although the north and south of Saint Lucia are in many ways worlds apart, there is one thing they do have in common: a friendly handshake wherever you go. Every Friday night, sound systems are rolled out, tables are set up and locals congregate to drink rum and celebrate the end of the working week. At these 'fish fries' visitors can soak up the atmosphere and sample local dishes such as deep-fried triggerfish from smoking seafood stands. In Anse La Raye, a picturesque fishing town in the south, doors of wooden clapboard houses are left open and the whole place turns into a street party. Likewise, at Gros Islet, a larger town ten minutes from Rodney Bay, expect dancing until the early hours.

To experience Saint Lucia to the full, a twin-trip really ought to be considered – a few nights enjoying the serenity and natural splendour of the south followed by a few nights in the buzzing north. But whatever you decide, you can be sure that a visit to this unique Caribbean island will lift your senses and leave you on a high you never knew possible. 🌴

