

With clear shallow water and ample marine life, St. Vincent and the Grenadines are among the Caribbean's preferred sites for scuba diving.

BY BRAD BOWINS, MD

The **V**irtues of



DONALD NAUSBAUM

Come away to the Caribbean you've never known

St. Vincent is a Caribbean isle with a difference. Unlike many of its sister islands, which dot the breathtaking blue of this irresistible sea, St. Vincent hasn't yet been paved over and built up to cater to tourist dollars. It's still a bit of an adventure destination all told, although as adventures go, this one's as soft as they come.

Picture a mountainous paradise draped in lush vegetation, teeming with exotic wildlife both above and below the sea, and at its very heart, an active volcano. The rugged landscape has made extensive development impossible, which is bad news for people wanting to make a buck but great news for the rest of us who just want to wallow in an untouched tropical paradise. And as investments go, keeping the island pristine and unsullied is paying huge dividends by luring travellers whose idea of a perfect vacation has little to do with casinos and faceless resorts.

St. Vincent, located towards the southern end of the Windward Islands, is fairly large as Caribbean nations go. Since 1762, a group of small islands and cays, known as the Grenadines, have been under its jurisdiction. The volcano which produced many of its black-sand beaches is known as La Soufriere, a French word which may be derivative of *soufre* (sulphur) or possibly *souffrir* (to suffer). The volcano dominates the Soufriere Moun-

St. Vincent

ISLAND PLANNER

GETTING THERE

St. Vincent and the Grenadines don't have an airport capable of handling jumbo jets. Visitors usually fly to Barbados or St. Lucia, then board a smaller inter-island flight to St. Vincent, Bequia, or one of the other islands.

A midweek round-trip flight from Toronto to Barbados on Air Canada (tel: 800-361-6340) costs about \$670. (Always ask about seat sales: At press time, there was a \$499 special). Round-trip inter-island flights between St. Vincent and Bequia on Liat Airlines can be had for \$35.

Ferries are another economical way to get from isle to isle, but those prone to motion sickness may want to opt out: Crossings can be rough.

The Falls of Baleine are among St. Vincent's most popular tourist draws.



BRAD BOWING

ACCOMMODATIONS

Hotels throughout the Grenadines are small, ranging from two- to 42-room properties. They vary from ultra-modern accommodations with televisions and air-conditioning like St. Vincent's Sunset Shores, to wilder retreats like Spring on Bequia. Winter rates are provided below, but prices are lower in the off-season (April 15 to December 14). Several resorts will provide weekly rates upon request. For information on alternative accommodations like apartments and guest houses, contact the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Tourist Office at the number below. (All rates in US dollars.)

Sunset Shores (St. Vincent). Standard double \$140; tel: (809) 458-4411, fax: (809) 457-4800.

Beachcombers (St. Vincent). Standard double \$80; tel: (809) 458-4283, fax: (809) 458-4385.

Emerald Valley Resort and Casino (St. Vincent). Standard double \$100; tel: (809) 456-7140, fax: (809) 456-7145.

Plantation House Hotel (Bequia). Standard double \$300; tel: (809) 458-3425, fax: (809) 458-3612.

Spring on Bequia. Standard double \$120, superior double \$195; tel: (809) 458-3414, fax: (809) 457-3305.

Frangipani (Bequia). Standard double \$55, superior double \$150; tel: (809) 458-3255, fax: (809) 458-3824.

Anchorage Yacht Club (Union Island). Standard double \$110, superior double \$150; tel: (809) 458-8221, fax: (809) 458-8365.

TOURS

Thanks to the spectacular scenery and well-maintained roads, driving tours are a great way to see St. Vincent. Guided tours can be arranged through hotels or taxi services. Here are a few to consider:

Fantasea Tours. Blue Lagoon; tel: (809) 457-4477, fax: (809) 457-5577.

Sam Taxi Tours. Cane Garden; tel: (809) 456-4338.

T's Tours. Sharpe Street; tel: (809) 456-5837, fax: (809) 456-5779.

GETTING AROUND

Taxi rates are set by the government to help protect tourists, but you can often negotiate a better deal. If you prefer to move around on your own, car rentals are available from several agencies and rates are quite reasonable:

Kim's Rentals. Grenville Street, P.O. Box 600, Kingstown, St. Vincent; tel: (809) 456-1884; fax: (809) 456-1681.

David's Auto Clinic. Sion Hill; tel: (809) 456-1116, fax: (809) 456-4026.

Unico Auto Rentals. Arnos Vale; tel: (809) 456-5744, fax: (809) 456-5745.

MARINE ACTIVITIES

There's a huge selection of water-based sports and sights throughout St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Popular activities include scuba diving, sailing and visits to the Falls of Baleine. Most excursions can be arranged upon arrival, although more elaborate sailing expeditions are best organized in advance.

For scuba diving:

Dive St. Vincent. P.O. Box 864, St. Vincent; tel: (809) 457-4714, fax: (809) 457-4948.

Sunsports. Gingerbread Complex, Bequia; tel: (809) 458-3577, fax: (809) 457-3031, e-mail: sunsport@carib-surf.com

Dive Paradise. Friendship Bay, Bequia; tel/fax: (809) 458-3563.

For boating:

Baleine Tours. Villa Beach; tel: (809) 457-4089.

Barefoot Holidays. Blue Lagoon; tel: (809) 456-9526, fax: (809) 456-9238, e-mail: barebum@caribserf.com

TOURIST INFORMATION

For more information on the islands, contact the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Tourist Office at 32 Park Road, Toronto, ON M4W 2N4; tel: (416) 924-5796, fax: (416) 924-5844.

tains, towering to a cloud-brushing 1234 metres. This is one of the most closely monitored volcanoes in the world — and it's also one of a very few active volcanos which you can safely hike to. The trail to the summit takes one-and-one-half to three hours, depending on weather and your physical condition. In any case, it's better to be physically fit before attempting this hike — the path is almost entirely uphill. You'll find the trail north of Georgetown, on the eastern side of the volcano. To reach it, you have to drive across the Rabacca Dry River Bed; it's called "dry" because porous volcanic cinders, which settled on the river after each eruption, have created a false "ground" under which the river continues to flow.

The narrow paved road leading to the beginning of the La Soufriere trail runs through Rabacca Farms. This farm itself is spectacular and well worth a visit: It's one of the largest coconut estates in the world (1300 hectares). The end of the road marks the beginning of the trail which starts at 366 metres, in an area known as the Bamboo Range. There's nothing quite like the haunting song of bamboo as the wind makes it creak and moan.

The first stretch of the trail is relatively gradual, ending at a place called the River Bed. Rest areas along the trail provide great views of the east coast and Georgetown, making it extremely obvious how far and high you've travelled.

The rest of the trail covers loose volcanic rocks and cinders. Due to the cloud cover up here, it's difficult to actually see the summit. No one's walked over the edge yet but you're advised to keep a sharp lookout since the summit seems to sneak up on you. And be warned: it's chilly up there. It was a nippy 18°C when I was there and trying to remember that I was still in the Caribbean wasn't easy.

Finally the clouds cleared a little and we could peer down into the



With less tourism than other Caribbean isles, the Grenadines cater to those who crave their own personal stretch of sand.

impressive crater. Right in the middle of it lies a massive pile of boulders where clouds of sulfurous steam hiss and roil. The Caribs — the islands' indigenous people — believed that the crater was home to a vengeful spirit; even today, very few of the locals ever visit the summit.

We admired the scenery and

The notorious
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Narrow down your options: A signpost on Union Island helps visitors get their bearings.

searched in vain for the ornery spirit, but eventually the time came to begin our descent. (Keep in mind that even if you don't feel like hiking up all the way, the east coast road is very scenic with its towering cliffs and impressive waves breaking on black-sand beaches.)

IMPRESSIVE SITES

The east coast tour takes one full day. For another great day trip, take a tour of the many impressive sites located to the south and west of St. Vincent. After breakfast, a short drive from your hotel will take you past the airport to the capital city of Kingstown. In a residential section of the capital lies Fort Charlotte, an 18th-century fortification built on a 183-metre-high hill. From there, a long meandering road hugs much of the island's west coast. The Botanical Gardens are just a short distance up this road. Although it's not well marked, there's little risk of missing this popular site, thanks to the frantic arm waving of tour guides by the roadside.

It's interesting to note that the immaculate Botanical Gardens are the oldest in the Western Hemisphere — they were established in 1765 by an English military doctor. The most unique denizen of the Gardens is a third-generation sucker of a bread-

fruit tree brought to St. Vincent by the notorious Captain Bligh, who was apparently on his way to the island when the infamous mutiny took place aboard the *Bounty*. Captain Bligh also managed to bring 300 breadfruit trees from Tahiti to St. Vincent on his second attempt. Another unique feature here is an aviary dedicated to the preservation of the endangered St. Vincent parrot. A tour of the entire gardens lasts about an hour.

Now well-equipped with a wealth of horticultural information, we headed north to the Vermont Nature Trails. Past Vermont, a narrow road begins to wend its way up through the rain forest on Grand Bonhomme Mountain's lower elevations. Two trails have been cleared through the area, both within a 4400-hectare park established in 1987 to protect the St. Vincent parrot and its natural habitat. It's estimated that only 450 to 500 of these exquisite birds still exist in the wild. Poaching to supply the pet market is probably the main reason for their decline.

The St. Vincent parrot is an Amazon species; its background colours are yellow-brown or green, while the head, wings and tail can be white, yellow, orange, green, violet or a combination of these colours. You're most

Port Elizabeth, Bequia:
Don't be surprised if you
see chickens walking
down Main Street or a
barber giving haircuts
under a tree.

The Caribs believed that La Soufriere's crater was home to a vengeful spirit; even today, very few locals ever visit the summit.

likely to catch a glimpse of the star attractions either in the early morning or late afternoon when the parrots leave and return to their roosts.

Restaurants are rare in this part of the island, but we had a lovely lunch at Wallilabou Anchorage, where the perfect setting in a sheltered bay is a great way to indulge in a variety of tasty Creole dishes. After you've digested a little, take some time to swim and snorkel in the beautiful calm waters of the bay.

PERFECT DIVE

Much of the best St. Vincent has to offer lies on and below the sea. The diving is great, better than you'll find around many Caribbean islands due to the vast range of small and unusual marine creatures. Seahorses and their cousins, Pipefishes, are a common sight in these waters; if you're very lucky, you might even see the rare and exquisite Frogfish, which attracts its prey with the "lure" dangling from its head.

Boat-lovers won't be disappointed either. There are many possible options, but whatever else you do, don't miss a tour up the leeward coast to the Falls of Baleine in the remote north-western part of the island at the base of the rugged Soufriere Mountains. Excursions include a stop at one of the many scenic, sheltered bays along the way and most tours offer passengers the choice of snorkelling or scuba diving. A word of warning, though: you'll have to swim a little when you leave the boat at the Falls — it's a wet landing. Then, after an easy 10-minute hike, you'll come face to face with a picture-perfect view of the 18-metre falls as they cascade over volcanic rocks into a freshwater pool. The cool water here is a perfect escape on a hot day, and we were able to swim right under the falls into what amounted to a natural Jacuzzi.

The St. Vincent "strip" is the informal name given to the hotel district which stretches from Villa Point to the end of Calliaqua Bay. For an island with limited space for tourists, St. Vincent does a good job taking care of the ones it can handle. There's a nice range of small hotels here, including the Sunset Shores Beach Hotel, which offers all the amenities of home. The two-storey building, tucked around a central pool and patio, has clean, bright, modern rooms. The indoor restaurant serves excellent — if somewhat pricey — meals. Next door is the Beachcomber whose rooms, if a little more spartan, appear comfortable and clean. The hotel's strength is its restaurant, which offers excellent meals at very reasonable prices.

St. Vincent's most famous resort is on nearby Young Island, a private isle located 200 yards off the mainland. Legend has it that a Carib chief traded the little island to an Englishman in exchange for a horse.

ON TO THE GRENADINES

The Grenadines make up approximately three dozen small islands and cays, eight of them inhabited. The total land area amounts to only 27 square kilometres, in sharp contrast to St. Vincent's — relative — sprawl of 214 square kilometres.



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The crystal-blue water and soft white sand of Palm Island's Casuarina Beach keep tourists happy.


This part of the Caribbean is ideal for sailing because there are no treacherous shoals and plenty of protected bays. Islands like Mustique and Canouan are home to exclusive resorts for the rich and famous, including British royalty and pop stars like David Bowie and Mick Jagger. A much less breathtaking alternative is Bequia, 15 kilometres due south of St. Vincent. At seven square miles, Bequia is the largest of the Grenadines and probably the most scenic. In fact, the tranquil, colourful setting has attracted several generations of writers. Accommodations are reasonably priced. The most upscale resort is Plantation House — just several cabanas and a main unit fashioned after a plantation Great House of yore. There's a pool on the exquisitely well-manicured grounds and a large beach-side bar to keep parched patrons watered on muggy afternoons. Delicious meals are served in the main house.

The Frangipani is a small, comfortable property associated with the popular Gingerbread Restaurant and Bar, a colourful establishment which draws a sizeable percentage of the island's visitors at happy hour. The most secluded resort is Spring on Bequia, located on the eastern side of the island. This unique resort is situated on the 250-year-old Spring Plantation, and three of the 10 rooms were built on

the foundation of the Great House. Don't miss a stop at Old Fort while you're there; the spectacular views of Admiralty Bay and Port Elizabeth, the island's capital, are hard to beat. Port Elizabeth is a small, casual town with a few shops, banks and restaurants. You shouldn't be surprised to see chickens walking down Main Street or a barber giving haircuts under a tree.

Friendship Bay on the south side of the island is another popular site. The local watering-hole, Spicy 'N Herby Rumshop and Restaurant, is a friendly place to have a cocktail. If you're not an experienced drinker, stay clear of

St. Vincent Very Strong Rum, whose name actually understates the liquor's potency.

Scuba aficionados will find paradise around Bequia, thanks to steeper slopes, small pinnacles and walls. We stumbled across a resident school of squid at a picturesque site known as The Pool; incredibly, they seemed to be as curious about us as we were about them. 



"Whenever I feel the urge to travel, I go out to the airport for a couple of hours, and that cures it."