

St Lucia

Rising like an emerald tooth from the flat Caribbean Sea, St Lucia definitely grabs your attention. Glossed over as some sort of glam honeymoon spot, this mountainous island has much more to offer than just posh digs.

Who says the Caribbean is all about lying on the beach? If that's all you do in St Lucia you're missing out. The rainforest-choked interior is made for hiking; a canopy of green covers the island like a haze. Rolling hills grow to form volcanic mountains and reach to the sky. The iconic Pitons rise from the waves to the clouds like pyramids of volcanic stone.

This isn't some glammed-up, theme-park holiday spot – St Lucia has a pulse. Your senses are bombarded with the sights, smells and sounds of an island that's truly alive. Towns like Castries move and shake to the sound of car horns, the smell of rotis fresh from the oven and reggae blaring on the speaker.

Sure you can find a beach to sit on and a nice hotel right beside it. There is great scuba diving to be found under the waves and the sailing is top notch. But it's much more than that. If you're looking for a Caribbean destination that will let you get under the skin of West Indian life – St Lucia is the one.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 238 sq miles
- **Capital** Castries
- **Country code** ☎ 758
- **Departure tax** EC\$68
- **Famous for** Jacquot parrot, the Pitons
- **Language** English, Creole
- **Money** Eastern Caribbean dollar (EC\$); EC\$1 = US\$0.38 = €0.24 = UK£0.19
- **Official name** Saint Lucia
- **People** St Lucians
- **Phrase** Soon come back
- **Population** 170,000
- **Visa** Not required for US, EU or Commonwealth visitors; see p647



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Soufrière** (p639) Tap into the local culture; enjoy the great diving and hiking too
- **Castries** (p632) Hit the buzzing market here, alive with locals, for some retail therapy
- **The Pitons** (p640) Climb these iconic towering peaks, or simply gaze at them over a cold beer
- **Marigot Bay** (p638) Explore this wine-glass bay, with its small beach and beautiful surroundings
- **Rodney Bay** (p635) See what all the fuss is about then grab a meal on the beach and watch the sunset

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Basing yourself in Soufrière spend a day exploring the town and the surrounding beaches. Take a day or two to do some of the great hikes in the area – be sure to include a climb to the top of the Pitons in there. Travel north to the lively city of Castries. Spend a day exploring the area around Gros Islet and Rodney Bay before returning south to unwind for the day in the thermal pools in Soufrière.
- **All Go – All the Time** Who says you have to sit around on holiday? From a home base in Soufrière go for a scuba dive on the surrounding reef. Then head south for a day of kitesurfing on the south coast. Return to Soufrière and climb Petit Piton and take in the view. Saddle up and go for a mountain bike ride on the new purpose-built biking tracks at Anse Chastanet. Head north for a day of R&R on the beach at Rodney Bay before attacking the zip-lines found in the northern rainforests.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

As with most Caribbean destinations the winter season is the most popular time to visit St Lucia. The very un-winter weather brings the crowds and jacks up the prices, especially during the driest period from December to March. Winter weather is sublime with average high temperatures around 81°F (27°C). Summer is quiet and hot with the July temperatures averaging 85°F (29°C). Hurricane season falls between June and October – expect some more rain this time of year and maybe the odd storm.

HISTORY

Archeological finds on the island indicate that St Lucia was settled by Arawaks between 1000 BC and 500 BC. Around AD 800 migrating Caribs conquered the Arawaks and established permanent settlements on the island.

St Lucia was outside the routes taken by Columbus during his four visits to the New World and was probably first sighted by Spanish explorers during the early 1500s. Caribs successfully fended off two British attempts at colonization in the 1600s only to be faced with French claims to the island a century down the road, when they established the island's first lasting European settlement, Soufrière, in 1746 and went about developing plantations. St Lucia's colonial history was marred by warfare, however, as the British still maintained their claim to the island.

In 1778 the British successfully invaded St Lucia, and established naval bases at Gros Islet and Pigeon Island, which they used as staging grounds for attacks on the French islands to the north. For the next few decades, possession of St Lucia seasawed between the British and the French. In 1814 the Treaty of Paris finally ceded the island to the British, ending 150 years of conflict during which St Lucia changed flags 14 times.

Culturally, the British were slow in replacing French customs, and it wasn't until 1842 that English nudged out French as St Lucia's official language. Other customs linger, and to this day the majority of people speak a French-based patois among themselves, attend Catholic services and live in villages with French names.

St Lucia gained internal autonomy in 1967 and then achieved full independence, as a member of the Commonwealth, on February 22, 1979. Politics have stabilized in recent times, with election results usually coming in the form of landslide victories for the opposing party. The downturn in the banana industry has meant that a diversification of industry is vital for economic prosperity – but, like everything in the Caribbean, change is slow.

THE CULTURE

St Lucians are generally laid-back, friendly people influenced by a mix of their English, French, African and Caribbean origins. For instance, if you walk into the Catholic cathedral in Castries, you'll find a building of

French design, an interior richly painted in bright African-inspired colors, portraits of a Black Madonna and child, and church services delivered in English. About 85% of St Lucians are Roman Catholics.

The population is about 165,000, one-third of whom live in Castries. Approximately 85% are of pure African ancestry. Another 10% are a mixture of African, British, French and East Indian ancestry, while about 4% are of pure East Indian or European descent.

The predominantly African heritage can be seen in the strong family ties that St Lucians hold and the survival of many traditional customs and superstitions. Obeah (Vodou) is still held in equal measures of respect and fear in places like Anse La Raye.

The local snakeman is visited by islanders for his medicinal powers; one such muscular remedy he uses involves massaging the thick fat of the boa constrictor on aching limbs.

There is an eclectic mix of cultural ideologies within St Lucia. Economic disparity has had a negative effect on the cultural identity of young people. Disenfranchised youth have turned to imported movements to find acceptance. There's the Rastafarian influence within the culture and an increasing alliance with urban American ghetto-thug-style culture.

As these groups have become more politicized police recrimination has increased and served to widen the gap of understanding. While there's a burgeoning drug culture, it is debatable whether this societal malaise is the chicken or the egg.

Though problems sound dire and are definitely on the rise, crime is still relatively low. Though many youth like to portray themselves as radical Rastas or ghetto thugs, they are more often than not harmless – slaves only to the fashion, not to the ideology.

ARTS

In the art world, St Lucia's favorite son is writer Derek Walcott. The gifted poet and playwright won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992. Strongly influenced by Tolstoy, Homer and Pushkin his writing is literate, intense and sweeping.

The musical sounds of the Caribbean are alive in St Lucia – calypso, reggae and dancehall all play an important role in the lives of locals. Though few artists are local, the grooves are a way of life and provide a soundtrack for everyone on the island.

HOW MUCH?

- **Taxi fare from Castries to Soufrière** EC\$170
- **Local bus fare from Castries to Soufrière** EC\$8
- **Comfortable hotel double room** US\$110
- **Bottle of Piton beer** EC\$8
- **Chicken roti** EC\$15

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

The striking landmass of St Lucia is one of its defining features. At only 27 miles long the teardrop shaped island packs a variety of topography into its 238 sq miles. Standing nearly as tall as they are long, the rolling hills and towering peaks of the interior make this green island an apparition of altitude rising from the sea.

Banana plantations dominate every flat section of land, and some not so flat. The Caribbean cash-crop is a staple industry for St Lucia. Lush tropical jungle forms a rat's nest of gnarled rainforest, filling the interior of the island with thick bush.

In the north, the island flattens out a little and the beaches get a bit wider – allowing infrastructure to get a foothold. In the south, the land rises sharply and continues in folds of green hills that stretch right to the shoreline. It's in this portion of the island, near the town of Soufrière, that St Lucia's iconic landmarks are found. The twin peaks of the Pitons rise 2500ft from the sea and dominate the horizon. These extinct volcano cones have come to define St Lucia, pose for a thousand pictures and even adorn the national beer.

Wildlife

St Lucia's vegetation ranges from dry and scrubby areas of cacti and hibiscus to lush jungly valleys with wild orchids, bromeliads, heliconia and lianas.

Under the British colonial administration, much of St Lucia's rainforest was targeted for timber harvesting. In many ways the independent St Lucian government has proved a far more effective environmental force, and while only about 10% of the island remains covered in rainforest, most of that has now

been set aside as nature reserve. The largest indigenous trees in the rainforest are the *gommier*, a towering gum tree, and the *chatagnier*, a huge buttress-trunked tree.

Fauna includes St Lucia parrots (see boxed text, p643), St Lucian orioles, purple-throated Carib hummingbirds, bats, lizards, iguanas, tree frogs, introduced mongooses, rabbitlike agouti and several snake species, including the fer-de-lance and the boa constrictor.

FOOD & DRINK

There is a good mix of eating options in St Lucia. West Indian fare is popular, and grilled fish, beans and rice and rotis are standard practice. The French influence can still be felt with bakeries turning out fresh bread and other savory treats.

Restaurants of all ethnic descriptions can be found at hotels throughout the island, including Italian, French and European classics.

Piton, the local beer, is a refreshing lager that's brewed on the island. The light-colored brew is a nice drop on a hot day.

CASTRIES

Walking along the crowded streets of Castries, one is bombarded with the kinetics of a city that is on the go. With the three-four rhythm of a throbbing calypso beat that permeates everywhere, the town has a pulse that ebbs and flows. Sights and smells overwhelm as slashes of color and wafts of fresh food snake through the crowded streets. The cultural soul of the city is the market area – it heaves and vibrates, with the locals scurrying to fetch their wares and sell their goods.

Busy, run-down streets – packed with pedestrians, cars, buses and taxis – form a grid of compact humanity. Sticky hot and minus any true aesthetics, the city's charm lives in the emotive response it evokes in the visitor.

HISTORY

The city, which was founded by the French in the 18th century, was ravaged by fire three times between 1785 and 1812, and again in 1948. Consequently, most of the city's historic buildings have been lost.

An area that survived the last fire was Derek Walcott Sq, a quiet square surrounded by a handful of 19th-century wooden buildings that have gingerbread-trim balconies, an at-

tractive Victorian-style library and the imposing Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Opposite the cathedral at the east side of the square is a lofty *saman* (monkey pod) tree that's estimated to be 400 years old.

The small city remains a friendly laid-back place with plenty of West Indian character.

ORIENTATION

Castries, the island's commercial center and capital, is a bustling port city set on a large natural harbor. The liveliest part of the city is just southeast of the port, at Jeremie and Peynier Sts, the site of the colorful Castries Market.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Book Salon (cnr Laborie & Jeremie Sts; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) A good selection of Caribbean titles, literary classics and the odd popular paperback thrown in.

Cultural Centers

Folk Research Centre (☎ 453-1477; Mt Pleasant) Documents the island's folk history, language and dance.

Emergency

Fire, Medical & Police (☎ 999)

Police Headquarters (☎ 452-3854/5; Bridge St)

Internet Access

ClickCom (☎ 452-4444; 1st fl, La Place Carenage, Jeremie St; per 15min EC\$2.50; ☎ 8:30am-5pm) Good computers with a decent broadband internet connection.

Medical Services

Victoria Hospital (☎ 452-2421; Hospital Rd) For medical emergencies.

Williams Pharmacy (☎ 452-2797; Bridge St)

Money

Both of the following banks have ATMs that accept Plus and Cirrus cards.

Bank of Nova Scotia (☎ 456-2100; William Peter Blvd)

Royal Bank of Canada (☎ 456-9200; William Peter Blvd)

Post

General post office (GPO; Bridge St; ☎ 8:15am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Telephone & Fax

There are plenty of card phones located around the city.

Cable & Wireless (Bridge St; ☎ 7:30am-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12:30pm Sat) Here you can buy phone cards, get your cell phone sorted or make a cheaper long-distance call.

If you just want a good view of the city, there's no need to venture as far as the college. The **scenic lookout** opposite Government House, about half a mile south of Castries, has a fine view of the port and capital, and also gives a glimpse of the attractive crown-topped Victorian mansion that serves as the residence of the governor-general.

ACTIVITIES

Dive Fair Helen (☎ 451-7716; www.divefairhelen.com; Vign Marina) offers a variety of courses and packages. It also has a shop in Marigot Bay.

Trim's Riding Academy (☎ 450-8273) offers a one-hour ride along the beach in Cas-en-Bas (US\$40) and a two-hour ride that also includes crossing the interior to Gros Islet (US\$50).

TOURS

Solar Tours & Travel (☎ 452-5898; www.solartoursandtravel.com; 20 Bridge St) offers a slew of tours of every description, from shopping to hiking, to history and even food.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

St Lucia Jazz Festival (www.slucijazz.org) Big-name music over four days in May.

Carnival (☎ 452-1859; www.luciancarnival.com) Castries' streets buzz with music, costume parade and calypso during this annual, and very lively, festival in July.

SLEEPING

With a range of resorts so close to the city, accommodations in Castries itself are thin on the ground.

Seaview Apartel (☎ 452-4359; PO Box 527; s/d EC\$189/216; 🚿) With all the flavor of diabetic chocolate, the Seaview is a means to an end for those desperate to be near the airport. Convenient for early flights, short stopovers and those wanting to be near downtown. The rooms are clean enough and there is air-conditioning.

Green Parrot (☎ 452-3399; s/d US\$85/96; 🚿 📺 📶) On Morne Fortune, 3 miles from town, this property sports tremendous harbor views. Situated on a hill overlooking town, the 40-year-old property is beginning to show its age. But amongst the slightly worn appearance lies a '60s charm that denotes a slight Austin Powers meets Fawltly Towers feel. There's wi-fi access, free shuttles into town and to the beach, and balconies attached to all the rooms.

EATING

Caribbean Pirates (☎ 452-2543; La Place Carenage; mains from EC\$15; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Ahoy you scurvy dogs, swing it yarr into this pirate-themed restaurant. It's about as authentic as one could get in the cruise-ship mall. Slightly cheesy, but the view out onto the harbor is great and it's a jovial, air-conditioned place to grab a burger.

Coal Pot (☎ 3452-5566; Vigie Cove; mains from US\$20; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Follow the road around the harbor to find this little hidden gem. It's right on the water and far enough from town that the tranquility of the sea lulls you into a diner's dream. Fresh seafood and a charming atmosphere are all a delight and well worth the efforts of seeking out The Coal Pot.

Green Parrot Restaurant (☎ 452-3399; lunch EC\$10-25, dinner EC\$90) The views from this hilltop restaurant are nearly as delicious as the food. With a fusion of European and Caribbean flavors, the London-trained chef continues to impress the casual diner or returning foodie. Lunch is fairly casual but, come dinnertime, the formalities ramp up and you are treated to one of the more-posh dining experiences in town.

JQ's Supermarket (William Peter Blvd; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat) is a large, well-stocked grocery store.

Follow the locals and the aroma to **Central Bakery** (Peynier St), where the bread is fresh and the pies are thick.

There is a row of bars, restaurants and bakeries along Mary Ann St, perfect for grabbing a sandwich and a beer and chatting with locals. For good rotis and local dishes, try the stalls at the south side of Castries Market. You can get drinking coconuts for EC\$1 at the market and at the Darling Rd bus stands. If you're preparing the perfect picnic, you could pick up some fruit at the market.

SHOPPING

On Jeremie St, on the west side of the market, you'll find vendors selling T-shirts, dolls, wood carvings, and other handicrafts and souvenirs.

Both **Pointe Seraphine**, on the north side of the harbor, and **La Place Carenage** (Jeremie St) have a **duty-free shopping complex** (🕒 9am-5pm) catering to cruise-ship passengers; there are a whole raft of shops selling liquor, jewelry, perfume and the usual duty-free items you'd expect. There are also some decent T-shirt

vendors and other tourist-oriented gifts if that's what you're after.

If you want to see how the locals shop, or to stock up on the essentials (and not so essential), there is only one place to go – **Castries Central Market**. Sprawling in size and impossible to miss from the center of town you can get almost anything here from fruit and vegetables to souvenirs to household items.

GETTING AROUND

Getting To/From the Airport

Taxis are plentiful at George FL Charles Airport, which is very close to downtown. Agree on a fare before you depart. Rates from the airport are roughly: EC\$20 to Derek Walcott Sq in central Castries; EC\$40 to Reduit Beach; EC\$50 to Rodney Bay Marina; and EC\$80 to Marigot Bay.

There are no direct buses; the nearest bus stop is about 1 mile away, at the northern end of the airport runway.

Taxi

You can hail a taxi on the street, ask your hotel to book one for you, or dial ☎ 452-1599. Always agree on a fare before you depart.

NORTHERN ST LUCIA

The northern end of the island is a haven for resorts, tourists and history. The beaches are wide, the waves are benign, there are sights to see and the secret is out. You may end up having to share the sand up here but the trade-off is a much greater variety of accommodation, eateries and things to do.

NORTH OF CASTRIES

Going north along Gros Islet Rd from Castries you are bombarded with hotel after hotel as the oceanside highway snakes its way to Rodney Bay. This portion of the island is overflowing with tourist infrastructure spanning most budgets. Most accommodations are either on the beach or a short walk to it from across the road.

Gablewoods Mall, just south of the Halcyon resort, has a supermarket, bank, pharmacy, bookstore and internet access.

The following accommodations are on Gros Islet Rd, 2 miles north of George FL

Charles Airport. They all have restaurants too. For snacks, head to one of the many outlets at Gablewoods Mall.

Up the hill and away from the action, **Apartment Espoir** (☎ 452-8134; www.apartmentespoir.com; Castries; studios/d US\$80/100) has 11 units, stunning views and a relaxed feel.

Recent renovations have improved **Villa Beach Cottages** (☎ 450-2884; www.villabeachcottages.com; Castries; cottages from US\$200, under 12yr free; 🏠 🚗 🚲), a compact Choc Bay resort. Kitchenettes in each cottage are a plus, and the proximity to the sand is uberhandy. For those not fond of salt water there are two micro swimming pools on site to help you cool off. The honeymoon suite with its spiral staircase is a hit with romantics.

It's rare that an all-inclusive retains any sort of charm or intimacy, but **Sandals Halcyon** (☎ 452-3081; www.sandals.co.uk; PO Box 399, Castries; r from US\$420; 🏠 🚗 🚲), a foot soldier in the Sandals army, is a standout. The resort is large enough that you can escape the organized 'fun' and do your own thing. Rates include meals and a stack of activities, including scuba diving.

With a vast property and an emphasis on creating space amongst the guests, **East Winds Inn** (☎ 552-8212; www.eastwinds.com; Castries; s/d all-inclusive from US\$600/800; 🏠 🚗 🚲) really doesn't feel like the typical all-inclusive. The cottage-style rooms are nicely appointed. The staff who tend bar at the self-service pool bar and the resort's stretch of beach are among the best on the island. Offers wi-fi access.

RODNEY BAY

Rodney Bay has a bit of a split personality. On one side there is the Rodney Bay Marina and then just down the way lies Reduit Beach. The marina is the stomping ground of sailors, the well heeled and the wannabes. The expansive floating parking lot sits adjacent to a series of shops, restaurants, banks and just about anything else a mariner might need.

The beach is home to a cluster of resorts that attract many a vacationer. The sandy shores of Reduit Beach are a big draw, though the sunburn per square footage of beach can get a bit much at times. The calm, turquoise waters are ideal for swimming and it's the sort of beach to which you go to be seen. The voluptuous volleyball players, taxi drivers hustling for fares and children breaking the sound barrier set a distinctive tone. Among the sea of people are several hotels,

enough restaurants to choose from and a few shops to liberate you from your savings.

Rodney Bay is also home to a dive shop, **Frog's Diving** (☎ 450-8831; www.frogsdiving.com).

It's a pleasant 30-minute round-trip walk by road between the marina and the beach, and a small ferry crosses the lagoon between the two areas several times a day.

Sleeping

Bay Gardens (☎ 452-8060; www.baygardenshotel.com; Rodney Bay; r from US\$120; 🏠 📺 📺) This new kid on the block – you can still smell the paint – is a beautiful, spacious edition to the strip. Nice amenities and aesthetics too.

Tuxedo Villas (☎ 452-8553; www.tuxedovillas.com; ste from US\$135; 🏠 📺 📺) Dwarfed by its neighbors, this unassuming hotel is a great basic option. All the rooms are equipped with kitchens and decorated in a style that screams color. The suites are large and well suited to those wanting to self cater, and the beach is just across the street.

Ginger Lily Hotel (☎ 458-0300; www.thegeringerlilyhotel.com; PO Box RB2528; r from US\$185; 🏠 📺 📺) The exceptional staff at the Ginger Lily are up to the same high standard as this excellent hotel itself. Vaulted ceilings in the largish rooms lead to balconies complete with hammocks. Mango trees surrounding the property shower unsuspecting guests with fresh fruit. There's a tiny bar to have an evening tittle at, and an inviting pool to cool off in. A good location on the strip and a friendly feel complete the inviting picture.

St Lucian By Rex Resort (☎ 452-8351; www.rexresorts.com; PO Box 512, Castries; r from US\$300; 🏠 📺 📺) If you're looking for a place abuzz with atmosphere and the energy of youth, this is a good bet. It consists of two interconnected hotels – one an all-inclusive, the other an à la carte option right next door. There are beach activities a go-go and a sprawling floor plan to get lost in. The rooms are awash with white-tiled, pastel walls and rattan furniture. There is a snaking faux-river pool, and the requisite swim-up bar and restaurant options.

Eating

Triangle (meals from EC\$10; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you're searching for a quick feed, Triangle is a great option. It's popular enough that the buffet has a relatively quick turn around so your lunch won't have been warming for that long, plus it's open until 2am.

Lime (☎ 452-7061; meals from EC\$18; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Another local standout, this is a great spot to practice your Creole as you lounge by the picnic tables with the local crew. The buffet has the West Indian standards you'd expect and there are plenty of cold Pitons just waiting for you behind the bar.

Edge (☎ 450-3343; Harmony Suites; mains from EC\$30; 🍴 dinner) With an eclectic mix of classic European dishes, Caribbean standards and sushi, the Edge does its best to please everyone. Nice views from the dining room help to wash down the tasty food.

Razmatz (mains from EC\$32; 🍴 dinner) How two Nepali brothers ended up opening a restaurant in St Lucia is a mystery – but you'll be glad they did. The fantastic Indian curries pack in the crowds; the fusion of classic flavors and local ingredients is deservedly popular. Namaste, mon!

Emeralds (☎ 458-3300; mains from EC\$40; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Sitting kitty-corner to the strip of hotels, Emeralds is a large, inviting place with enough seating for most of the island. Under the open-air dining area you can choose from an ample menu of mostly European favorites, with some Caribbean dishes thrown into the mix for good measure.

Buzz Seafood & Grill (☎ 458-0450; mains from EC\$48; 🍴 dinner) Seafood is the order of the day at this 'buzzing' Rodney Bay eatery. It's a locals' favorite and is recommended for temporary locals too.

Chic (☎ 452-9999; Royal St Lucian; mains from EC\$65; 🍴 dinner) It's a rare pleasure in St Lucia to actually eat inside, but this fine-dining stand-out is a joy for more than just that. The intimate dining room is the setting for fine seafood, game such as rabbit and delicately prepared beef and lamb. Outstanding food in a formal setting.

There are a couple of small stores selling groceries and spirits, and a well-stocked grocery store at the Rodney Bay Mall.

Entertainment

Late Lime (☎ 452-7061; 🍴 11pm-1am) Above the Lime, this has music and dancing on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights.

Triangle Pub (☎ 452-0334) A no-nonsense booze hall that packs in the locals. There are karaoke nights, comedy nights and lots of debauchery in between.

Spinnakers (☎ 452-8491) Right on Reduit Beach, Spinnakers is a catch-all for locals,

cruise shippers, and seemingly everybody else. Tables can be hard to come by, but the atmosphere is fun, rambunctious and very St Lucian.

In the early evening, don't be surprised if you're served two drinks for each one you order. Many local bars and restaurants are in competition to see who can put on the longest and most generous happy hour.

GROS ISLET

Walking through the ramshackle fishing village that is Gros Islet, it's hard to fathom that the diamante-encrusted tourist trap of Rodney Bay is just up the road. This sleepy community is mercifully spared the trappings of tourism en masse. Brimming with character and full of interesting characters – Gros Islet is a great insight into the reality of St Lucia. The local community is a mix of fishers, Rastas, loafers and expats committed to a slower pace of life.

There are some interesting accommodation options here and some of the best authentic West Indian restaurants on the island. Rustic and so basic it's almost falling to bits, this town won't be the cat's meow for everyone. The contrast with its neighbors is astounding.

The village really heats up on Friday nights when the weekly jump-up gets going. Street stalls sell fresh fish, grilled chicken and other delights. The music plays at full volume and the dance moves flow more readily as the rum punch starts to take effect. It's a great party that will rage most of the night and is a classic St Lucian cultural adventure.

Most buses making the coastal drive north from Castries terminate in the center of Gros Islet.

Sleeping

Bay Guesthouse (☎ 450-8956; www.bay-guesthouse.com; s/d US\$30/35; 📺) Near the end of the beach it's hard to miss the safety orange building that is the Bay Guesthouse. This great property is run by a charming couple who have a great insight into the needs of the budget traveler. Cozy rooms and free wi-fi make it a great budget option. Everything you'd ever want for the very reasonable price, this could be the best budget place to stay on the island.

Palm Haven (☎ 456-8500; www.palmhavenhotel.com; s/d US\$100/120) Splitting the difference and sitting half way between Rodney Bay and Gros

Islet, Palm Haven is a nice compromise. On the opposite side of the road to the water, it features a decidedly un-resort-like flavor. This property is aimed at the Caribbean traveler so there are few frills, but the location is pleasant and the rates are affordable.

Landings at St Lucia (☎ 458-7300; www.thelandingsstlucia.com; r from US\$225; 📺 📺 📺) This sparkling new property on Gros Islet is a feast for the eyes. Luxurious and beautifully designed with the details in mind. The cathedral-like lobby leads to a channel, spilling into the sea. The rooms are freshly fitted out with four-poster beds, nice linen and exquisite views.

East Winds Inn (☎ 452-8212; www.eastwinds.com; r all-inclusive from US\$600; 📺 📺) All-inclusive resorts tend to capture their guests, insulating them from the reality of a destination. While true, this all-in resort is a good choice for those wanting to forgo exploration and deciding where you should eat for dinner. The green cottages dot the property and an attentive staff swarms around doing their bit. Rooms are pleasant and the return rate is a testament to its popularity.

Eating & Drinking

Somewhere Special (☎ 450-8481; Gros Islet; mains from EC\$6; 📺 breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you're looking for somewhere special to take your sweetie, this could be your best option in Gros Islet. This small restaurant serves yummy meals in its tiny dining room. They'll even do your laundry if you ask nicely.

ourpick Jambe Debois (Pigeon Island, mains from EC\$10; 📺 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right in the heart of historic Pigeon Island National Park sits this little unassuming pub. It's a real find with the walls plastered with local art, a tiny book exchange out back and free wi-fi. The meals are hearty, tasty and served up under the thatched-roof patio. The views out onto the sea are top notch and on Sunday nights they have live jazz to soothe the soul.

Sonia's Place (☎ 450-0234; mains from EC\$12; 📺 lunch & dinner) Sonia is a real charmer. Give her a call before you arrive and she'll make pretty much whatever you want for dinner. Her little shack of a restaurant isn't much to look at, but who cares, the food is brilliant.

Yacht Haven (☎ 458-7300; Landings at St Lucia; mains from US\$35; 📺 lunch & dinner) Elegance on a deck – hard to believe, but this restaurant in the Landings development is a winner. Dark

hardwood decking, shade sails and views of the sea are all on display. The food is an up-scale mix of island favorites and imported delights. It's definitely a place to be seen, but the food is the best social pay-off.

Village Gate (Dauphin St) The heart and soul of the Friday jump-up is right here at the Village Gate. This is the place to grab a cold one with the locals, kick up your heels and let your hair down.

PIGEON ISLAND NATIONAL PARK

Pigeon Island has a spicy history dating back to the 1550s, when St Lucia's first French settler, Jambe de Bois (Wooden Leg), used the island as a base for raiding passing Spanish ships. Two centuries later, British admiral George Rodney fortified Pigeon Island, using it to monitor the French fleet on Martinique. Rodney's fleet set sail from Pigeon Island in 1782 for his most decisive military engagement, the Battle of the Saints.

With the end of hostilities between the two European rivals, the fort slipped into disuse in the 19th century, although the USA established a small signal station here during WWII.

In the 1970s a sandy causeway was constructed between Gros Islet and Pigeon Island, turning the island into a peninsula, and in 1979 Pigeon 'Island' was established as a national park.

It's a fun place to explore, with paths winding around the remains of **Fort Rodney**, whose partially intact stone buildings create a certain ghost-town effect. The grounds are well-endowed with lofty trees, manicured lawns and fine coastal views. Near the gate is a kitchen dating from 1824 and further on is the main fortress. A vague path leads you around the coast of the 'island' – it's a great way to take it all in. The walk takes about 20 minutes.

At the top of Fort Rodney Hill, you'll find a small but well-preserved fortress, a few rusting cannons and a spectacular view. You can see south across Rodney Bay to the rolling hills dotting the coast, and north past Pointe du Cap to Martinique. For more views, continue north past the stone foundations of the ridge battery to the top of the 359ft **Signal Peak**, about a 20-minute walk.

Pigeon Island (admission EC\$13; ☎ 9am-5pm, center closed Sun) is administered by the St Lucia National Trust. You find a pub and a restaurant selling sandwiches at moderate prices.

Most of the coastline around Pigeon Island is rocky, though there's a pleasant little sandy beach just east of the jetty.

It's about a 20-minute walk along the causeway from Gros Islet to Pigeon Point.

SOUTHERN ST LUCIA

As the road heads south from Castries, it encounters the rising topography of the island – twisting and turning around hairpin corners and steep hills – and uncluttered ocean views. The jade-green jungle expands to the interior, and as the road nears Soufrière the Pitons emerge on the horizon and dominate the skyline.

Passing through the tiny fishing villages of Anse La Raye and Canaries, and the banana plantations that surround, the real St Lucia comes to the fore. Those keen for a full day on the road can make the scenic loop and circle the southern portion of the island via the coast road.

MARIGOT BAY

Deep, sheltered Marigot Bay is a stunning example of natural architecture. Sheltered by towering palms and the surrounding hills the narrow inlet is said to have hidden the entire British fleet from its French pursuers. Yachts play the same trick these days – the bay is a popular place to drop anchor and hide away for a few nights. Even if you don't have a ship to hide – it's still a great place to get lost for the day.

The bay leapt to the attention of the world in 1967 when the Hollywood musical *Doctor Doolittle* was filmed in the bay. Residents, restaurateurs and hoteliers have been milking this ever since – but it's no surprise, the beautiful surrounds were made for the movies.

There is a small beach that juts out into the bay and is accessible by a small ferry that grinds a groove from one side of the bay to the other as it makes hundreds of trips per day (EC\$5 round-trip).

Dive Fair Helen (☎ 451-7716; www.divefairhelen.com) is a well-run center that offers a variety of courses and packages; it also operates out of Vigie Marina (Castries).

A short ferry ride across the bay delivers you to **Marigot Beach Club** (☎ 451-4974; www.marigotdiversort.com; villas from US\$175; ☎ ☎ ☎). Though getting on in years, the pleasant outlook and

BUS TA MOVE

When it comes to cultural experiences on St Lucia, few can rival the simple act of taking the local bus. These pillars of public transport aren't hulking diesel beasts of civil infrastructure. No, they are more like a van that should have been sent to the wreckers a good decade ago.

They take car pooling to a whole new level, where five people would be comfortable, 10 would be cozy and 20 is what the driver wants. Squashed in like tinned fish on the way home from the cannery you more than get to know your neighbor. As added entertainment the thumping tunes provided by the driver gets the whole crowd into it – dancehall cranked up to 11 with 19 of your newest friends singing along.

And just to top it off the driver attacks the road with the ferocity of a rally-car driver on crack, power shifting into corners and cranking round blind hairpins like someone who's made peace with God. Not since Keanu Reeves said, 'Dude, there's a bomb on the bus' has public transport been this entertaining.

relaxed feel haven't faded a bit. Four-poster beds and kitchenettes come standard, and there is a small beach to kick back on. Offers wi-fi access.

The new kid on the Marigot Bay block, **Discovery** (☎ 458-5300; www.discoverystlucia.com; r from US\$660; ♿ 📺 📶) has upped the ante on the local luxury scale. It's popular with the super-yacht set, and fitted out with the posh fixtures and features you'd expect. The attention to detail is superb with wi-fi access, wooden in-lays, clean lines and wall-to-wall hardwood. It has an onsite spa and funky pool, and it offers yoga and tai-chi. Every room is a suite. Nice.

Dolittle's Restaurant & Beach Bar (Marigot Beach Club; mains from EC\$25; ☎ lunch & dinner) is a classic Caribbean waterside eatery with plenty of fish and other relaxed fare on the menu; by night it raises its game a bit and gets a teaspoon more formal.

With a very *Sex in the City* vibe and a style best described as a penchant for illumination, **Pink Snail Bar** (Discovery; ☎ drinks from 6pm) is the place to be for a sunset cocktail or two. Pony up to the glowing pink bar and tuck into a nice glass of Bollinger.

ANSE LA RAYE

Heading south along the coast from Marigot Bay, the winding road snakes its way through the tiny village of Anse La Raye. The smattering of colorful buildings is typical of every St Lucian fishing community, and the village itself gives a good insight into the daily lives of the locals. Things spice up on a Friday night when the sleepy village wakes up big time. 'Seafood Friday' has become one of the highlights for St Lucians from one end of the island to the other. Street stalls sell fish

of every variety that fit those magic criteria of being decadently delicious and amazingly affordable. The party gets a bit wild and goes most of the night. It will definitely be memorable, filled with food, refreshments and dance.

SOUFRIÈRE

If one town were to be the heart and soul of St Lucia, it would have to be Soufrière. Where the resort communities elsewhere on the island glisten with the glow of affluence, this decidedly working class community is alight with a strength of spirit. The local people exude a warmth that is as endearing as it is impossible to fake. Though the buildings and infrastructure are not set in the 21st century, the character that the town has acquired is much greater than the sum of its parts.

The landscape surrounding the town is little short of breathtaking. The sky-scraping towers of rock known as the Pitons stand guard over the town. Jutting from the sea, covered in vegetation and ending in a summit that looks other worldly, these iconic St Lucian landmarks are the pride of Soufrière.

The French first settled here in 1746 and named the town Soufrière for the nearby sulfur springs that are still visited today. Though most visitors will only pass through or stop for the day, to really experience the place more time is needed. The accommodations fit every budget and the enveloping warmth of the community makes it nigh on impossible to leave.

Information

Soufrière tourist office (☎ 459-7419; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) On the waterfront.

Sights & Activities

ANSE CHASTANET

Anse Chastanet could be the quintessential St Lucian beach experience. Though only a mile or so from Soufrière, it feels like a lost tropical world. The tiny sheltered bay is protected by high cliffs and towering palms on the shore. The petite beach is great for a dip and the snorkeling just off shore is some of the best on the island.

You'll find a dive shop here (opposite) to take you deeper, a restaurant for refueling and a hotel if you just can't tear yourself away. It's a strenuous 35-minute walk from Soufrière, over the steep coastal road. The views of the Pitons along the way make the effort worthwhile.

SULPHUR SPRINGS

Looking like something off the surface of the moon the **Sulphur Springs** (admission EC\$7; ☎ 9am-5pm) are saddled with the unfortunate tagline of being the world's only drive-in volcano. The reality is far from the garish description. There isn't a crater, or a cauldron of magma to check out – you'll have to be content with a bit of stinky, boiling muck. Bubbling mud is observed from platforms surrounded by vents releasing the oh-so-pleasant sulfur gas – scenting the air with a rotten-eggs aroma.

Be happy that the platform is there. A few years back, a tour guide ventured onto the soft earth and fell up to his waist in boiling mud. He was lucky to survive, and now has a great story to tell. Speaking of great stories, your entry fee includes a tour guide who has a fair bit to say – and they'll expect a tip for their trouble.

To get there from Soufrière, go south on the potholed Vieux Fort road, which winds uphill as it leaves town. About a five-minute drive out of Soufrière, take the downhill fork to the left at the Sulphur Springs sign, from where it's half a mile further to the park entrance.

MORNE COUBARIL ESTATE

This **estate** (☎ 459-7340; adult/child EC\$20/10; ☎ 9am-4:30pm), on the Vieux Fort road about half a mile north of Sulphur Springs, offers a great insight into the plantation world that dominated this country for so long. Before the days of tourism, and to this day to a lesser extent, this is how St Lucia paid its way in the world. You can wander through the working coconut and cocoa plantation; check out the

traditional buildings and the ruins of a sugar mill. There are horse-trekking options and the chance to learn about the local fauna.

DIAMOND BOTANICAL GARDENS

The Diamond Estate's **botanical gardens, waterfall and mineral baths** (adult EC\$16.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun & holidays) are all at the same site.

Paths wind through the gardens, which are planted with tropical flowers and trees, including numerous heliconia and ginger specimens. At the back of the gardens a small waterfall drops down a rock face that is stained a rich orange from the warm mineral waters. The waterfall featured briefly in the movie *Superman II* as the site from where Superman plucked an orchid for Lois Lane.

The mineral baths date from 1784, when they were built atop hot springs so that the troops of King Louis XVI of France could take advantage of their therapeutic effects. The baths were largely destroyed during the French Revolution, but in recent times a few have been restored and are open to visitors.

The Diamond Estate is 1 mile east of the Soufrière town center, via Sir Arthur Lewis St, and the way is signposted.

MALGRETOU

Heading south from Soufrière along the dirt, coastal road you soon come upon the tranquil beach of Malgretout. It's a pleasant stretch of beach with some good snorkeling just off shore; there is even a little bar to wet your whistle after a dip.

A bit further on down the road is the picturesque **Pitons Waterfall** (EC\$7.50). The grounds surrounding the falls are lush and alive with rainforest species. The falls themselves are great for a soak and are much less frequently visited compared to some of the other waterfalls in the area. To get to the falls from the beach, head up the paved road for about 200 yards and look out for the sign on the left.

THE PITONS

These dueling peaks of stone aren't just nice to look at; you can climb them if the mood strikes. Though both will take the day to reach the summit, Petit Piton is steeper than its big brother Gros Piton and is a more strenuous climb. The track to the top of either spire is tricky to find and easy to lose. A guide is recommended, not only to show you the way,

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

Delana Modeste is like an 18-year-old girl from almost anywhere. She has ambitions to see the world, to go to school in London or Paris. The difference is that in many people's eyes she's already found paradise just by being lucky enough to be born in St Lucia.

So where do you live?

I live here in Soufrière, I have my whole life. This is a great part of the island – it's isn't too hot and busy like Castries. And it isn't overrun with tourists like Rodney Bay.

What sort of people come to Soufrière?

Mostly, it's independent travelers looking to get off the beaten track. People searching for a quiet place to stay. It's really peaceful here, it's just like when my grandma was young, not much has changed. There are more tourists now but things have remained much like they were when she was young.

What are your favorite things to do around here?

Well I love to go watch the rugby – but you have to go and hike the Pitons when you are here, and make sure you take in the little things like watching the local fishermen bringing in their catch or even just looking at the flowers. The longer you spend here, the more you see.

What are some hidden places around here that are just amazing?

I'm not going to tell you! You'll tell everyone and they won't be hidden anymore. People will just have to come here and discover them for themselves!

Too right.

but also to offer insight into the local flora and fauna

One recommended guide is **Jah-I** (☎ 787-5949; Gros Piton climb US\$25, Petit Piton climb US\$40), a friendly Rasta who's been guiding the peaks for 30 years and who offers discounts if you bring some friends.

DIVING

Action Adventure Divers (☎ 459-5200) is a friendly crew running daily trips, while **Scuba St Lucia** (☎ 459-7000; www.ansechastanet.com; Anse Chastanet Resort) is a well-organized dive outfit, right on the beach at Anse Chastanet. Scuba St Lucia run PADI courses at all levels and are a friendly bunch; its rules are a bit antiquated, however, forcing certified divers to do a shore dive and demonstrate their skills before being allowed on the boats.

CYCLING

Bike St Lucia (☎ 457-1400; www.bikestlucia.com; Anse Chastanet Resort; 2½hr for US\$50), in Anse Chastanet, has miles of purpose-built, mountain-bike trails to test your single-track skills. The trails vary in degree of difficulty, from beginner to the advanced track designed by former world-champion Tinker Juarez.

Sleeping

Cascara (☎ 457-1070; s/d/apt EC\$40/50/60) Every now and then you get to meet a real character that

sticks in your memories long beyond crimson sunsets and soft sand beaches. Momma Chastante the owner of this quirky little establishment is just one of those people. Her warmth and charm more than make up for the fact that the rooms are about as basic as you can get. There are a few apartments with shared facilities and a couple of rooms with the bare bones of furnishings. The views down onto the harbor are great and the relaxed atmosphere permeates the whole place. On top of all this, it's so cheap you won't believe your eyes when you see the bill.

Hummingbird Beach Resort (☎ 459-7232; www.istlucia.co.uk; Soufrière; s/d from US\$65/90; ☎ ☑ ☒) Perched only a few feet from the beach, this compact resort has a great feel. Tastefully decorated rooms, complete with four-poster beds surround the pool. The views of the Pitons from the balconies are fantastic and the attached restaurant is a winner too.

Talk to me cool spot (☎ 459-7437; West Coast Rd; r US\$75) Up the hill and hidden away from view, you'd be hard pressed to stumble upon this spot. The rooms are basic and affordable if a little shabby. The hillside locale offers appealing views but makes for a somewhat cumbersome walk to town.

Still Beach Resort (☎ 459-7261; www.thestillresort.com; r from US\$135; ☎) Tucked into the corner of Hummingbird Beach, it sports a huge, sunset-facing deck. The rooms are a bit average, but

the price is right. It has an on-site dive shop and restaurant, and access to the sand.

Mago Estate (☎ 459-5880; www.magohotel.com; Soufrière; r from US\$175; 🍷 🍷 🍷) With more steps than a 5th-floor walk-up, Mago really is cut into the hill. The labyrinth of buildings fans out among the ferns, affording unobstructed views of Soufrière and the Pitons. The rooms are pleasant enough, if only a little tired, but the balconies and hammocks more than make up for it. There is a great restaurant on-site and one of the best bars around – you'll find it tough to leave.

Stonefield Estate (☎ 459-7037; www.stonefieldvillas.com; PO Box 228, Soufrière; 1- to 3-bedroom villas from US\$350; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This laid-back, family-run property on a former estate is the island's ultimate in understated cool. The 11 hip villas feature sumptuous living areas in natural whitewashed stone and wood, stylishly simple rustic furniture, garden showers, and huge decks (some with private plunge pools) with double hammocks and glorious views over Petit Piton.

Ladera (☎ 459-7323; www.ladera.com; ste from US\$600; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Where some rooms come with a view, the views here come with a room. Everything you need for that dream holiday is at your beck and call at this spectacular resort. Rooms have their own pools that cut through the living area and form the outside edge of the living space. From your private aquatic sanctuary you can sip bubbly and watch the sun peek behind the Pitons through the unobstructed views of the open wall. Though prohibitively expensive for most travelers, for those with the means, the experience will be worth every dollar. Offers wi-fi access.

our pick Jade Mountain (☎ 459-4000; www.jademountainstlucia.com; PO Box 4000, Soufrière; r incl meals US\$1600 to US\$2050; 🍷 🍷) If you're searching for the ultimate in luxury, privacy and rooms with a view in St Lucia – look no further. Jade Mountain is it. Sitting castle-like atop the hill overlooking the Pitons and the sea, this could very well be the best place to stay in the whole country. Each room comes complete with its own private infinity pool and the pinnacle of furnishings and fixtures. The Escher-like structure is an engineering marvel, complete with a rooftop bar with a view only rivaled by a helicopter. It is staunchly technology free, so no telephones, TVs or internet in the rooms – leave it all behind and embrace the pure decadent luxury.

TWIST MY ARM: THE PLACES THE AUTHORS WANTED TO KEEP SECRET

At **Jah Lambs** (5 High St, Soufrière; mains from EC\$6; 🍷 lunch), the proprietor is an ultra-laid-back Rastafarian who dishes out some of the best vegetarian fare in St Lucia. This is the sort of place that you could walk right past and never be the wiser. But it is definitely worth seeking out this tiny shack that impersonates a restaurant. In fact, it's not much more than a trestle table set up in the kitchen. It's not fancy – actually it's barely a restaurant. It's hard to find but it's fabulous.

Eating

A handful of local restaurants offer good food at reasonable prices near the central square that borders Church, Sir Arthur Lewis and Bridge Sts.

Camilla's (☎ 459-5379; 7 Bridge St; mains EC\$20-50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Take your pick between the flouncy upstairs gourmet Creole restaurant with local specialties, such as goat stew and callaloo (root vegetable) soup, or the less-formal, café-cum-snack bar downstairs (open until 2am).

Mago Estate (☎ 459-5880; West Coast Hwy; mains US\$22-27; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's well worth the uphill journey to this wonderful eating establishment. The aesthetic look is like the cantina out of Star Wars, with an enormous boulder forming the uphill wall. Eclectic decorative decisions complete the interesting dining setting. The food is a French-influenced mixture of West Indian and European classics.

Piti Piton and Treehouse (☎ 459-7000; mains from EC\$40; 🍷 dinner) Though a little ways out from Soufrière, at the Anse Chastanet Resort, the journey is well worth the effort, as you are rewarded with one of the best meals in St Lucia. Many of the vegetables and herbs are grown to exacting standards, either on the property or by local farmers. The menu constantly changes with the season and the inspiration of the cooking team – safe to say, you're in good hands here.

Hummingbird (mains EC\$40-120; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Mouth-watering local dishes are intermixed with old favorites to form a perfect culinary balance. The fish is prepared with style and flavor and served up with a great

view. The service is a bit slow, but what's your hurry?

Pirates Cove (Bay St; mains EC\$60-80; ☺ lunch & dinner) Right on the waterfront, you can watch the fishers arrive with their catch. Pasta and fish are the specialties with a catch-of-the-day platter that's great every day.

Located in the center of town, **Eroline's Foods** (Church St) is the local supermarket.

Entertainment

Soufrière is a pretty quiet town as far as night-life goes, but there is some fun to be found. Most hotels have a bar and a view so are prime real estate for a quiet cocktail. If it's a more lively night you seek, follow the music in town and you'll be sure to come across some trouble to get into.

Ladera Resort (☎ 459-7323; Soufrière) Even if you can't afford to spend the night at this spectacular resort, you can always pony up to the bar. Jaw-dropping views over the Pitons all washed down with the sweet taste of a rum punch and your main squeeze by your side.

Big Space bar is easy to find, as the downtown frontage is covered nearly completely by a sign for Piton beer. This is the bar to be on the weekends where the local crew gets on the lash and dances the night away.

CHOISEUL

Choiseul, a little village south of Soufrière, has an active handicraft industry, and its roadside arts-and-crafts center is a good place to pick up locally made dolls, baskets, pottery and wood carvings.

Located between Choiseul and Paiye is **Balenbouche Estate** (☎ 455-1244; www.balenbouche.com; r US\$110-180), the tranquil 18th-century estate home of the congenial Uta Lawaetz and her daughters. You can stay in the lov-

ingly restored house furnished with simple, beautiful antiques, or in one of three hippyish garden cottages with mosaic-tiled baths. You really feel that you have stepped back in time here; complete the experience with a stroll round the grounds and truly atmospheric jungle-covered mill ruins.

THE SOUTH & EAST COASTS

The road up the east coast from Vieux Fort is relatively straight and uneventful, passing through a few local villages and numerous banana plantations before turning inland at the town of Dennery and making a scenic, winding cut across the mountainous rainforest to Castries.

The guys at **Reef Kite & Surf** (☎ 454-3418; www.slucia.com/kitesurf; Vieux Fort) can sort you out with windsurfing and kitesurfing gear if you know what you're doing and lessons if you don't. This dedicated group of enthusiasts will have you praying for wind and trying to get air by the end of the day. Gear rentals are US\$80 per day and a three-hour lesson costs US\$125 (including gear).

Maria Islands Nature Reserve (☎ 454-5014; ☺ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), east of Vieux Fort, is the only habitat of the *kouwes* snake, one of the world's rarest grass snakes, and the Maria Islands ground lizard. Because it's a sanctuary for terns, noddies and other seabirds, this two-island reserve is only accessible outside the summer nesting season.

Mamiku Gardens (☎ 455-3729; www.mamiku.com; ☺ 9am-5pm), between Mon Repos and Praslin, is a fascinating historic garden that has been left delightfully unmanicured. Wander among orchids, rock pools and aromatic plants, or visit the medicinal herb garden.

ST LUCIA PARROT

The rainforest is home to the St Lucia parrot (*Amazona versicolor*), locally called the Jacquot, the island's colorful endemic parrot. Despite the Jacquot's status as the national bird and its appearance on everything from T-shirts to St Lucian passports, it has teetered on the brink of extinction, and occasionally made it onto island dinner tables in times past.

However, new environmental laws and a successful effort to educate islanders on the plight of the parrot seem to be working to save it. Fines for shooting or capturing parrots have been increased a hundredfold, while much of the parrots' habitat has been set aside for protection. So far, the protection measures have been a success; the 2000 parrot census found 800 birds, up from less than 100 in the mid-1970s. Most of the parrots nest in the Edmond and Quillesse Forest Reserves, east of Soufrière.

Grande Anse, 6 miles north of Dennerly, is renowned for its nesting leatherback turtles. **Desbarra Turtle Watch Group** (☎ 284-2812), a local community group, organizes tours in season (March to August).

DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

There is a real variety in accommodations on St Lucia. Good-value, budget guesthouses and hotels are found in Soufrière and, to a lesser extent, to the north. Rodney Bay is dominated by larger-scale resorts where the amenities are inflated and the rates are in concert with that. The growth of all-inclusive resorts is changing the rooming landscape – more visitors are now spending all their time in their sequestered holiday cocoons, infrequently venturing out into the world.

Most hotels are near or on a beach and almost all of them have an on-site restaurant. Rates are often quoted in US dollars, but payment can be made in the equivalent EC dollars or with a major credit card.

See p815 for a guide to budget, midrange and top-end accommodation price ranges in this book.

ACTIVITIES

Adventure Activities

A new attraction has hit St Lucia. **Rain Forest Sky Rides** (☎ 458-5151; www.rfat.com) will give you a whole new perspective on the rainforest canopy. They have a rather sedate tramway (US\$72) that escorts you through the canopy or a more adrenaline-filled option of a zip-line (US\$85). The flying fox has 10 separate lines guaranteed to get you high with excitement.

Beaches & Swimming

St Lucia has quite a few swimming options and all the beaches are open to the public. By Caribbean standards the beaches aren't spectacular. Most are either small, slightly dirty, overcrowded or a combination of all three.

The best of the lot can be found on the busier northwest side of the island. Gros Islet has a nice stretch of sand and the resort-dominated strip in Rodney Bay has a pleasant, albeit busy section of oceanfront.

The east side of the island is less protected and is subject to rougher seas and unpredict-

able ocean currents – some beaches are closed to swimmers for this reason.

Cycling

Bike St Lucia (p641) has miles of mountain-biking trails through the rainforest near Anse Chastanet.

Diving & Snorkeling

If you think the above-ground scenery is spectacular in St Lucia, you should see it under the sea. The rugged, underwater landscape is pocked with reefs and teeming with sea life.

Anse Chastanet, near Soufrière, has been designated a marine park. It boasts spectacular, near-shore reefs, with a wide variety of corals, sponges and reef fish; it's excellent for both diving and snorkeling.

There are a couple of wreck dives, including *Lesleen*, a 165ft freighter that was deliberately sunk in 1986 to create an artificial reef. It now sits upright in 65ft of water near Anse Cochon, another popular dive area. Anse Cochon is also a favored snorkeling stop on day sails to Soufrière.

There's good snorkeling and diving beneath Petit Piton and Gros Piton, the coastal mountains that loom to the south of Soufrière.

A popular dive just a bit further south is Keyhole Pinnacles, consisting of coral-encrusted underwater mounts that rise to within a few feet of the surface. For more information, see p55.

There are a number of dive shops on St Lucia, including in Castries (p634), Rodney Bay (p636), Marigot Bay (p638) and Soufrière (p641). Expect to pay US\$40 to US\$50 for a single dive.

Hiking

Three main trails lead into the mountainous interior on public lands that are administered by the **Department of Forest & Lands** (☎ 450-2231).

The Barre de L'isle Trail is a good choice if you're on a budget, as you can get to the trailhead from Castries for EC\$5 by hopping on a Vieux Fort bus (about 30 minutes). This lush rainforest hike, which is in the center of the island along the ridge that divides the eastern and western halves of St Lucia, leads to the top of the 1446ft Morne la Cambe. It provides some fine views along the way, and takes about three hours round-trip. The trailhead, which begins at the south side of the highway, is clearly marked. Monday to Friday,

Department of Forest & Lands personnel wait at the trailhead to collect the park fee and are available as guides.

As trailhead access for the other two forest-reserve hikes is inland from major roads and bus routes, these hikes are usually undertaken as part of an organized tour. The Des Cartiers Rainforest Trail at the Quillesse Forest Reserve begins 6 miles inland from Micoud and passes through the habitat of the rare St Lucia parrot. The Edmond Forest Reserve Trail begins about 7 miles east of Soufrière, crosses a rainforest of tall trees interlaced with orchids and bromeliads, and offers fine views of St Lucia's highest peak, the 3118ft Mt Gimie.

While the latter two forest-reserve hikes take only a few hours to walk, the travel time to either trailhead is about 90 minutes one way from Castries, so the hikes are full-day outings. The Department of Forest & Lands and the island's main tour agencies arrange outings several days a week.

A hike up either of the Pitons peaks takes about four hours round-trip, and shouldn't be done without an experienced guide (p640).

Horseback Riding

Trim's Riding Academy (p634) offers horseback riding.

Golf

The **St Lucia Golf & Country Club** (☎ 450-8523), on the northern tip of the island, has an 18-hole par-71 course and offers lessons (per half-hour around EC\$105).

Windsurfing & Kitesurfing

Head to Reef Kite & Surf (p643), on the windy south coast, for rental and lessons.

BOOKS

Iconic St Lucian author Derek Walcott has a great body of work to choose from. His 1990 epic poem *Omeros*, published two years be-

fore he won the Nobel Prize for literature, is a shining example. The ambitious project, retelling Homer's *Odyssey* in the modern day Caribbean was praised for its panache, scope and success.

BUSINESS HOURS

The following are common business hours in St Lucia; exceptions are noted in reviews.

Banks ☎ 8:30am to 3pm Monday to Thursday, 8:30am to 5pm Friday

Bars ☎ to midnight

Businesses ☎ 8:30am to 12:30pm and 1:30pm to 4:30pm Monday to Friday

Government offices ☎ 8:30am to 12:30pm and 1:30pm to 4:30pm Monday to Friday

Restaurants ☎ breakfast from 8:30am, lunch from noon, dinner 6:30pm to 9pm

Shops ☎ 8:30am to 12:30pm and 1:30pm to 4:30pm Monday to Friday, 8am to noon Saturday

CHILDREN

Though not specifically a kid-oriented island, travel with children on St Lucia is fairly straightforward. The water is good for swimming and there are few big waves. One area of caution is on the roads – the drivers on St Lucia set a new standard for recklessness. Be sure to keep an eye on the little ones around the roadways.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bilharzia (schistosomiasis) is endemic to St Lucia; the general precaution is to avoid wading or swimming in fresh water. See p841 for further details. Hikers should keep in mind that the poisonous fer-de-lance favors brushy undergrowth, so stick to well-trodden trails.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Germany (☎ 450-8050; Care Service Bldg, Massade Industrial Estate, Gros Islet)

UK (☎ 452-2484/5; NIS Waterfront Bldg, 2nd fl, PO Box 227, Castries)

PRACTICALITIES

- **Newspapers & Magazines** *The Voice* is the island's main tri-weekly newspaper.
- **Radio** Tune into music, news and patois programs on Radio Caribbean International (101.1FM).
- **Video Systems** NTSC is the standard video system.
- **Electricity** The current used is 220V (50 cycles). The country uses three-pronged, square European-style plugs.
- **Weights & Measures** The imperial system is used here.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (www.worldcruising.com; November-December) is a fun 'race' across the Atlantic starting off the coast of Spain and ending in St Lucia. Think of a car rally on the high seas that ends up in paradise.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

As with most destinations in the region, St Lucia isn't all that friendly to those with *alternative* lifestyles. Gay men should be especially aware that homosexuality is generally not accepted and travelers should exercise caution when in public. This outdated point of view sadly shows little sign of remission as homophobia is rampant and openly accepted.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day January 1

New Year's Holiday January 2

Independence Day February 22

Good Friday Late March/early April

Easter Monday Late March/early April

Labour Day May 1

Whit Monday Eighth Monday after Easter

Corpus Christi Ninth Thursday after Easter

Emancipation Day August 3

Thanksgiving Day October 5

National Day December 13

Christmas Day December 25

Boxing Day December 26

Note that when some holidays fall on Sunday, they are celebrated on the following Monday.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is becoming more prevalent in all corners of the island. Larger hotels often have wireless connectivity for their guests and internet cafés can be found in most towns.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Government of St Lucia (www.stlucia.gov.lc) Information about government matters.

St Lucia Star (www.stluciarstar.com) A weekly online newspaper that offers a good insight into the country.

MAPS

Basic maps are easily found at tourist information outlets and most hotels. Nautical charts can be found at marine supply shops and at bookstores in the larger towns.

MEDICAL SERVICES

There is a hospital in Castries (☎ 453-7059) and in Vieux Fort (☎ 454-6041). There is also a clinic in Rodney Bay (☎ 452-7059).

MONEY

The Eastern Caribbean dollar (EC\$) is the island currency. US dollars are often accepted by taxi drivers and larger hotels – be sure when negotiating taxi fares and room rates that you are both talking about the same currency. Traveler's checks can be exchanged in banks and in larger hotels without issue.

Visa, American Express and MasterCard are widely accepted at hotels, car-rental agencies and high-end restaurants. You can get cash advances on your credit card through bank machines (provided your card has a security code or PIN). Also, bank cards that have either the Cirrus or the Plus symbol will usually work in bank machines. Royal Bank and Scotia Bank readily accept foreign cards and are available in Castries and Rodney Bay.

An 8% tax and 10% service charge are added to the bill at all but the cheapest hotels and restaurants; there's no need for additional tipping.

POST

Most towns and all cities have a central post office. Hours are usually 8:30am to 3pm Monday to Thursday, closing at 5pm on Friday.

TELEPHONE

St Lucia's area code is ☎ 758. To call from North America, dial ☎ 1-758, followed by the seven-digit local number. From elsewhere, dial your country's international access code + ☎ 758 + the local number. We have included only the seven-digit local number for St Lucia listings in this chapter.

There are both card and coin phones around the island. Phone cards are sold at tourist-office booths, Cable & Wireless offices and many stores.

Cellular-phone users can use their phones in St Lucia. If you have a GSM phone that is unlocked you can purchase a new SIM card for it for EC\$20 from **Cable & Wireless** (Castries; Bridge St; ☎ 7:30am-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12:30pm Sat). This gives you a local number to call from and is much cheaper in the long run compared to global roaming.

For more information on phone cards and making long-distance calls, see p826.

TOURIST INFORMATION

There are tourist information booths in the arrivals hall of both of the island's airports. You will also find tourist information offices in all the larger towns.

St Lucia Tourist Board (www.stlucia.org) is the official site of the tourism board; it has great general information and is a good place to start.

TOURS

The **St Lucia National Trust** (☎ 452-5005; www.sluna.trust.org) can arrange tours to the island's coastal nature reserves: the Maria Island Nature Reserve, off the southeast coast, and the Frigate Islands Nature Reserve, off the east coast. Both are popular with bird-watchers.

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Most resorts have some facilities for disabled travelers, but it is best to enquire before heading out. Public buses are definitely not suitable for the disabled as the cramped minivans are a hassle for everyone to squeeze in and out of.

VISAS

For all foreign visitors, stays of over 28 days generally require a visa.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

St Lucia is generally a safe destination for women. Though normal precautions should be taken, the crime rate is relatively low.

WORK

Travelers wishing to work in St Lucia will need to obtain a work permit before undertaking paid employment. For complete requirements have a look at www.stlucia.gov.lc.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering St Lucia

Most visitors must show a valid passport – French citizens can enter with a national identity card. Visitors to the island are required to fill in an immigration form on arrival detailing the length, purpose and location of their stay, plus any customs declarations they may have. An onward or round-trip ticket or proof of sufficient funds is officially required.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- **Ambulance & Fire** ☎ 911
- **Police** ☎ 999

Air

St Lucia has two airports: **Hewanorra International Airport** (UVF; ☎ 454-6355), in Vieux Fort at the remote southern tip of the island, and **George FL Charles Airport** (SLU; ☎ 452-1156), in Castries near the main tourist area.

Scheduled international flights land at Hewanorra, which has a longer runway, while flights from within the Caribbean and charters generally land at the more central George FL Charles Airport.

Both airports have tourist-information booths, taxi stands, phones, and booths for car-rental agencies. The tourist-information booths book rooms, sell phone cards and will exchange US cash into EC dollars at slightly disadvantaged rates. There is a EC\$68 departure tax levied on all departing passengers.

Offices for the main airlines serving St Lucia are in central Castries.

The following airlines fly to/from St Lucia from within the Caribbean and beyond:

Air Canada (☎ 454-6038; www.aircanada.com)
Montreal, Toronto

Air Jamaica (☎ 453-6611; www.airjamaica.com)
Atlanta, Barbados, Boston, Chicago, Miami, Montego Bay, New York, Newark

American Airlines (☎ 4524-6777; www.aa.com)
Chicago, Miami, New York

British Airways (☎ 452-3951; www.ba.com) London,
Port of Spain

Delta Airlines (☎ 452-9683; www.delta.com) Atlanta

LIAT (☎ 452-3056, after hr 452-2348; www.liat.com)

Barbados, St. Vincent, Trinidad, Dominica, Antigua
Virgin Atlantic (☎ 454-3610; www.virgin-atlantic.com)
London, Manchester

Sea

CRUISE SHIP

Cruise ships dock in Castries. A number of berths, some on the east side of the harbor near the town center and others at Pointe Seraphine on the north side of the harbor, have a duty-free shopping complex.

FERRY

The ferry service **L'Express des Îles** (www.express-des-iles.com) operates a daily 80-minute express

catamaran between Castries and Fort-de-France on Martinique. It also has a service on Saturday and Sunday to Guadeloupe (six hours) and Dominica (four hours). Departure days and times change frequently; check in advance with any local travel agent. On St Lucia, tickets can be purchased from **Carib Travel** (☎ 452-2151; PO Box 102, Micoud St).

There is a crossing between St Lucia and Guadeloupe run by **Brudey Frères** (☎ 590-90-04-48; www.brudey-freres.fr), in Point-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, once or twice a week (one way/return EC\$80/115). Tickets can be purchased from local travel agencies.

For more information on these ferry boats, see p577.

YACHT

Customs and immigration can be cleared at Rodney Bay, Castries, Marigot Bay or Vieux Fort. Most yachtsies pull in at Rodney Bay, where there is a full-service marina and a couple of marked customs slips opposite the customs office.

It's easy to clear customs and immigration at Marigot Bay, where you can anchor in the inner harbor and dinghy over to the customs office. Castries is a more congested scene, and yachts entering the harbor are required to go directly to the customs dock. If there's no room, you should head for the anchorage spot east of the customs buoy. At Vieux Fort, you can anchor off the big ship dock, where customs is located.

Popular anchorages include Reduit Beach, the area southeast of Pigeon Island, Rodney Bay Marina, Marigot Bay, Anse Chastanet, Anse Cochon and Soufrière Bay.

Yacht charters are available from **Sunsail** (☎ 452-8648) and **DSL Yachting** (☎ 452-8531), both at Rodney Bay Marina, and from the **Moorings** (☎ 451-4357), at Marigot Bay. For addresses and booking information, see p835.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle

Bicycles are not really available for rent on St Lucia. The island's roads are very winding in places and the local drivers seem to relish taking blind corners with the ferocity of a Formula-1 driver. The roads are also peppered with hills and are devoid of any kind of shoulder. In other words, even if you could find a bicycle to ride, you probably wouldn't want to.

Bus

Bus service is via privately owned minivans. They're a cheap way to get around, and the means by which most islanders get to town, school and work. St Lucia's main road forms a big loop around the island, and buses stop at all towns along the way. They're frequent between main towns (such as Castries to Gros Islet) and generally run until 10pm (later on Friday); however, there is no scheduled timetable. Very few buses run on Sunday.

If there's no bus stop nearby, you can wave buses down en route as long as there's space for the bus to pull over. Pay the fare directly to the driver. Buses leave their stops when they are full, so often catching a bus on the road is limited by the number of seats available. At times it's easier to backtrack to a larger town in order to find a bus that has a seat for you.

If you're trying to circle the island by public transportation, note that afternoon bus services between Soufrière and Castries are unreliable, so it's best to travel in a counterclockwise direction, catching a morning bus from Castries to Soufrière and returning via Vieux Fort (up the east coast) in the afternoon.

In Castries, buses going south to Soufrière and Vieux Fort or north to Gros Islet can be found east of the market on Darling Rd. Sample fares from Castries to Gros Islet (Route 1A) or Marigot Bay (Route 3C) are EC\$2.50, to Vieux Fort (Route 2H) EC\$7 and to Soufrière (Route 3D) EC\$10.

Route numbers are displayed on the buses, but it's best to check with the driver, just in case. Buses are easily distinguishable from taxis as they have a green license plate, while taxis have a blue or red one.

Car & Motorcycle

DRIVER'S LICENSE

Drivers on St Lucia must hold an International Driving Permit or purchase a local driving permit (EC\$54), which is valid for three months.

RENTAL

Avis, Hertz and National, as well as smaller (and generally cheaper) local firms, operate out of both Hewanorra and George FL Charles airports, nearly all offering unlimited mileage.

The cheapest cars, those without air-conditioning, rent for about US\$65 a day; you'll find the best rates on the internet. If you're planning an extensive tour of the island, it's advisable to hire a 4WD, as many of the roads are steep and smaller ones can become little more than potholed mudslides after a bout of rain.

Motorcycles and scooters are available from some rental-car companies. However, the hilly terrain, aggressive drivers and narrow roads make St Lucia suitable only for experienced riders.

ROAD CONDITIONS

Roads vary greatly around the island, with some sections being newly surfaced and others deeply potholed. Make sure you have a workable jack and spare tire available. Many of the interior and southern roads are also very winding and narrow. Gas stations are distributed around the island.

ROAD RULES

On St Lucia, drive on the left-hand side. Speed limits are generally 15mph (24km/h) in towns and 30mph (48km/h) on major roads.