

Pamela Corante
CATEGORY: Magazine Feature Article
WORD COUNT: 1051 words

St. Lucia—Life Lessons from the Locals

Sitting in rush-hour traffic on a Los Angeles freeway is one thing. Waiting in the back seat of a taxi parked at the driver's house in the middle of a jungle is another.

Not a concrete jungle, but the real thing, thick and leafy. Anxious to escape the intensity of our lives in Los Angeles, my husband Jim and I eschewed the crowded Hawaiian beaches and chose the Caribbean island of St. Lucia for our honeymoon.

Our island odyssey began with an unexpected detour 20 minutes into the cab ride from the airport: The earthen driveway of a tiny house on stilts, boldly upstaging a dramatic curtain of obscenely lush greenery just off a dirt road with potholes the size of hot tubs.

“This is where I live,” our driver beamed. Before we could muster a response, he waved a manila envelope at us and said in a disarming patois cadence, “I need to give this to my ma. I be right back.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were back on the bumpy road to Soufriere in the southern part of the island.

Emerging from the dense tropical foliage, we were treated to a view of a sleepy storybook village fronted by a turquoise harbor dotted with toy-like fishing boats clad in bold primary colors.

-continued-

Before us, Soufriere basked lazily in the afternoon sun, while the signature twin volcanic peaks known as the Pitons towered protectively over the village, two gentle green giants beneath an azure sky.

Nothing in the travel brochures prepared us for the refreshing simplicity of Soufriere, delightfully lacking in high-rise developments, chain restaurants and, as we discovered earlier, fast-paced traffic arterials. Here was an earthly paradise whose infrastructure gave you no choice but to slow down and enjoy the scenery.

The only soundtrack accompanying our introduction to St. Lucia was the regular honk of oncoming cars on the two-lane road. Our driver would wave every time a car honked its horn at him. The other driver would wave back. Soufriere being such a small village, it is common to see your neighbors and friends out on the narrow, winding roads, and the honking is a friendly greeting, unlike on the freeways of Los Angeles.

Two close-calls later, we checked in at the Jalousie Resort and set off to explore the beach, where eventually the sunset gods astounded us with a riot of violet and fuchsia over a lavender ocean. We walked slowly back to our cottage, immersed in the nocturnal music of the jungle.

That night, we fell asleep to a symphony of tree frogs outside the window of our cottage, feeling a million miles away from the traffic snarls of home.

After three languorous days of basking on the powder-soft sands of a secluded bay, our island idyll took on an eco-conscious flavor. We'd arranged to visit the Soufriere Marine Management Area (SMMA), an organization dedicated to preserving the marine ecosystem that thrives in the ocean off the southwestern coast of St. Lucia.

-continued-

Jim and I boarded one of the SMMA's motorboats at the Jalousie dock. Within minutes, we were privy to the organization's day-to-day work, while enjoying breathtaking views of the towering Pitons and the stunningly lush coastline. I flashed on Gilligan's Island at the sight of pristine beaches thick with willowy palm trees, devoid of any signs of life except for the occasional fisherman sunbathing alongside his candy-colored rowboat.

SMMA manager Kai Wulf and marine ranger Peter Butcher, both divers, were not shy about expressing passion for their island home. The rainbow-hued fish and gorgeously diverse coral make St. Lucia a haven for scuba divers and intrepid filmmakers alike, some of whom have captured the island's dream-like beauty in feature films.

Once ashore, Kai and Peter invite us to lunch at a tiny restaurant on the upper level of a traditional wood and filigree building in Soufriere. The structure, like most older buildings in town, is built in the plantation style with long balconies along the front and side. Delicate, lace-like ironwork adorns the edge of the overhanging roof. Jalousies, or wooden shutters with slats that can be adjusted to block out the sun, grace the windows.

Over a spicy curried chicken stew with fried plantains, rice and red peas, we listen intently as Kai and Peter describe the St. Lucian temperament—easygoing, friendly by nature, blissfully unfamiliar with the concept of ASAP. The latter is evidenced by the “Live Slow” motto we see on local cars and on some of the T-shirts for sale in the lone souvenir shop we passed on the way to the restaurant.

-continued-

Blame it on the salt air, or perhaps the heady aroma of the thousands of fruit trees and flowering plants that thrive on the island, but by the end of our fourth day in Soufriere, Jim and I are ready to sell our earthly belongings just to be able to live in a place where “rush hour” means everybody is trying to get to the same Friday night party, or “jump- up.”

A balmy breeze is blowing at the Jalousie’s jump-up on the beach, perhaps not the most authentic version, but one where we discover the Harmony Trio, three local musicians whose quirky blend of music combines reggae, calypso and a little bit of funk, thanks to the lead singer’s edgy vocals.

We become instant groupies, following the band to their Wednesday night gig at Dasheene, one of St. Lucia’s most exclusive restaurants, and again the following Friday at Jalousie’s jump-up, a fitting end to our two-week island escape.

Back in L.A., we listen to a cassette tape we bought from the group’s drummer. The sound quality conjures a vision of a tape recorder held up to an amplifier while the band plays their hearts out on a neighbor’s patio.

Yet everything about the tape evokes St. Lucia—a Caribbean paradise of exotic blooms whose intoxicating perfume travels on the trade winds. A beguiling island with winding, imperfect roads that reward the patient driver with views worthy of a Gauguin painting. A place whose gentle inhabitants make time to pause and enjoy the moment, and who will graciously invite you to do the same, even if it involves a slight detour to their family’s gingerbread house in the middle of an emerald-green rain forest.

###