

FOOD & WINE

NOVEMBER 2006

thanksgiving

A COMPLETE GUIDE

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ST. LUCIA: THE NEXT 'IT' ISLAND

**ST. LUCIA HAS STUNNING NATURAL BEAUTY,
DELICIOUS FOOD AND A NEW SPATE OF TOP
HOTELS—NOT TO MENTION SOME OF THE
BEST STREET PARTIES IN THE CARIBBEAN.**

It's hard to know what's sexier—the views from Ladera resort or the cuisine of its chef, Orlando Satchell, OPPOSITE.



Sexy Cuisine

BY SALMA ABDELNOUR PHOTOGRAPHS BY CEDRIC ANGELES

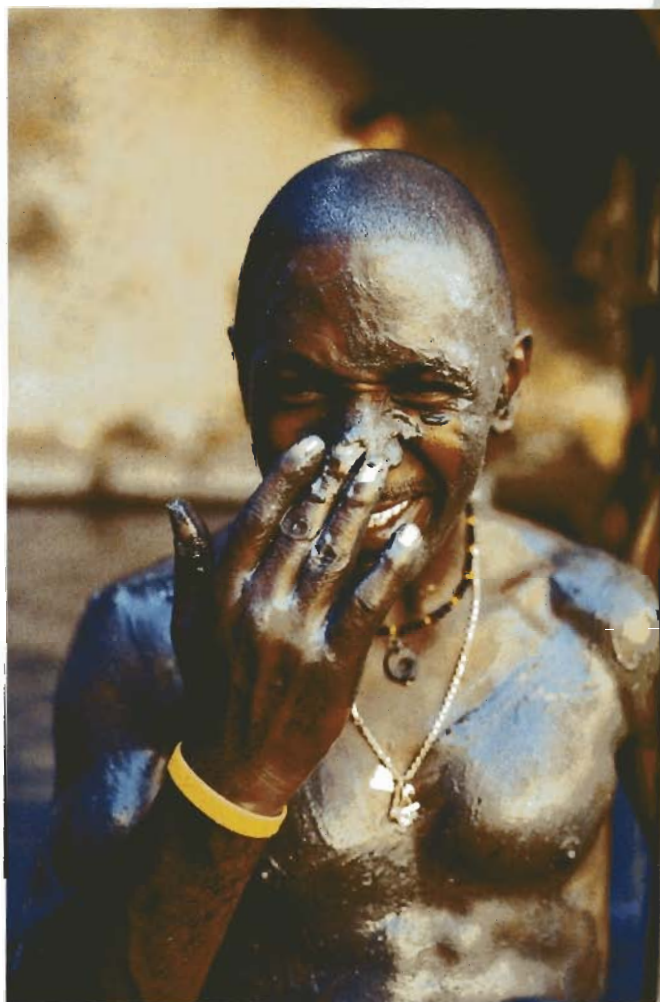


I'M LYING FLAT ON MY BACK BY THE PRIVATE POOL OF MY ST. LUCIA VILLA, BLISSFULLY ALONE EXCEPT FOR THE TWO HUMMINGBIRDS THAT JUST LANDED ON MY FLIP-FLOPS.

Like all nine villas and 16 suites at the Ladera resort where I'm staying, my villa has only three walls, so when I'm inside I'm really outside, and vice versa. From my open-air living room, bedroom and shower, there's nothing blocking my view of the bright blue sky and the turquoise Caribbean framed by the island's pointy-tipped Piton mountains. This scene is so preposterously romantic, I should be having a torrid affair on my four-poster, mosquito-netted bed. But right now it's just me and the hummingbirds, and four would be a crowd.

St. Lucia attracts a lot of honeymooners, and on the north side of the island—full of busy, couples-oriented resorts—a solo traveler can get all kinds of perplexed looks. Here on the quiet south side there's more of a free-spirited, live-and-let-live vibe. A few posh resorts, like Ladera and nearby Anse Chastanet, are tucked into the hillsides, but there's a frontier feeling about this part of the island, a sense that someone could get happily lost here. At the same time, there's the sense that—for better or worse—St. Lucia is turning into the Caribbean's next It island, and everything may be about to change.

At the moment, the Jalousie Plantation, a nearly 200-acre property on a spectacular white-sand beach near Ladera, is being converted from a cluster of slightly dated cottages, formerly owned by Hilton, into what will likely be one of the Caribbean's most over-the-top resorts—to be completed next year—with more than 100 new villas and suites, some private residences and the island's most ambitious spa and scuba center. The 32-year-old Anse Chastanet, which has some open-air rooms similar to Ladera's, is adding 24 suites this fall and a new restaurant,





St. Lucia's mud baths attract locals like Ladera chef Orlando Satchell, OPPOSITE, who might cool off in one of the resort's plunge pools. At Marigot Bay, BOTTOM, Rainforest Hideaway serves dishes like wild salmon with pumpkin puree, BELOW.



ST. LUCIA SYBARITE'S GUIDE

- **GETTING THERE** **Air Jamaica** flies nonstop from New York (airjamaica.com).
- **WHERE TO STAY** **Ladera** A hillside resort on the untamed south side with a lovely restaurant, **Dasheene** (doubles from \$350; Soufrière; 800-738-4752 or ladera.com). **Anse Chastanet** A southside resort with 24 new suites and a new restaurant (doubles from \$285; Soufrière; 800-223-1108 or ansechastanet.com). **Discovery at Marigot Bay** New from hotelier Grace Leo-Andrieu (doubles from \$220; Marigot; 758-458-5300 or discoverystlucia.com).
- **WHERE TO EAT** **The Coal Pot** An outdoor French-Creole restaurant (Castries; 758-452-5566). **Friday Night Jump-Ups** Street parties with grilled seafood (St. Lucia Tourist Board; 758-450-2078 or stlucia.org).
- **WHAT TO DO** **Gros Piton Hike** A four-hour climb (St. Lucia Forest and Lands Department; 758-459-9748). **Sulphur Springs Mud Baths** Early morning is the time to go (Soufrière; 758-459-7686). **Diamond Botanical Gardens** Flowers and a waterfall (Soufrière Estate, Soufrière; 758-459-7155).



Jade Mountain Club. About a 45-minute drive up the coast, hotelier Grace Leo-Andrieu (of St. Bart's Eden Rock, Paris's Lancaster and dozens of chic properties around the world) is overseeing the brand-new Discovery at Marigot Bay resort, on the site of the old Hurricane Hole Hotel, where the Apollo 11 astronauts stayed after their 1969 moon landing. Discovery has its own yacht marina, a spa, a lounge called the Pink Snail Bar with furniture by Philippe Starck, plus four restaurants and a bakery. The taxi driver who picks me up at the airport tells me that in the past few weeks he's given rides around the island to Denzel Washington and Nicolas Cage, who was rumored to be searching for property to buy.

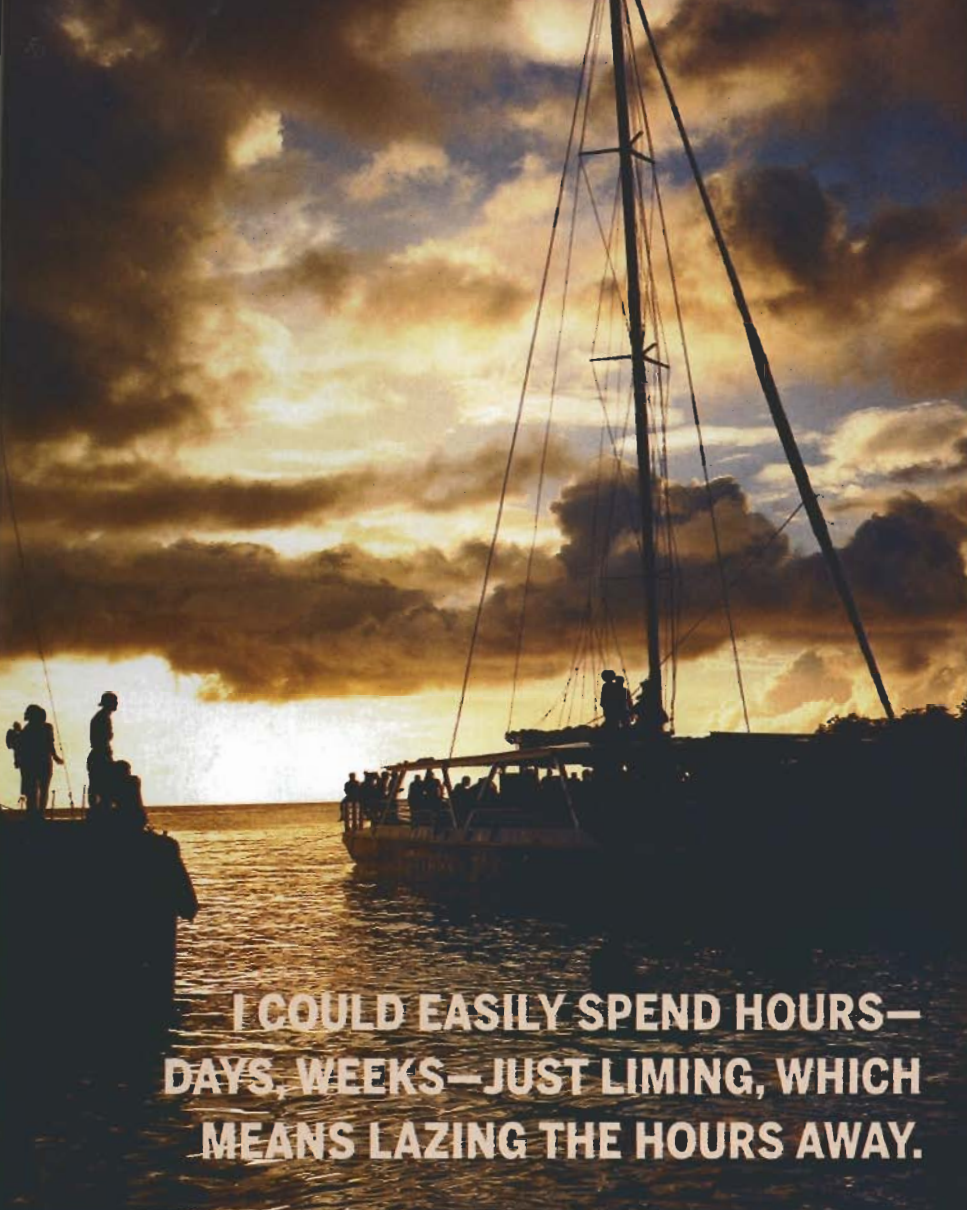
Right now, it's safe to say that no celebrity looking for land on St. Lucia is coming here for the nightlife. The two main cities, Soufrière in the south and Castries in the north, are sleepy, run-down and virtually devoid of swanky hangouts. The only thing that really explains the growing interest in St. Lucia is that this is, very simply, an astonishingly beautiful place. The landscape has more striking variety than just about any other island in the Caribbean: tall cone-shaped mountains, a lush green interior of blooming tropical flowers, a rain forest, a volcano and beaches made of sand that ranges in color from white to silver to black.

Someone looking for a symbol of both St. Lucia's frontier spirit and its impending It-ness could find it in the presence of one Lord Glenconnor, a.k.a. Sir Colin Tennant, not far down the mountainside from Ladera. In the late 1950s, the eccentric, flamboyant Tennant, who is married to Lady Anne—a former lady-in-waiting to the late Princess Margaret—left his family's ancestral castle in Scotland and bought the Eastern Caribbean island of Mustique, then gave a chunk of land there to Princess Margaret as a wedding gift. Property values shot up, and, practically overnight, the island became known as a glamorous little ghetto for the likes of Mick Jagger, Jerry Hall and the rowdier members of the British aristocracy.

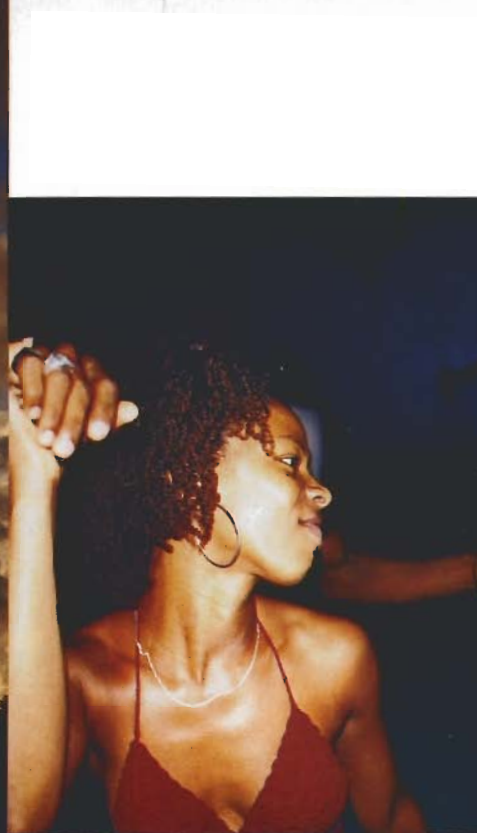
In the late '80s, after some unlucky financial deals and tangles with the locals, documented in the 2001 film *The Man Who Bought Mustique*, Tennant fled the island and bought a giant estate on St. Lucia, near what's now Jalousie. Until last year, he ran a Caribbean restaurant there called Bang. St. Lucia, though, turned out to be no Mustique—it's too big, too impervious to diva expats—and has been much slower to develop anything resembling a scene. In the fall of 2005, Tennant turned Bang over to his daughter, May Creasy, and Jalousie has since bought it.

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**I COULD EASILY SPEND HOURS—
DAYS, WEEKS—JUST LIMING, WHICH
MEANS LAZING THE HOURS AWAY.**



**At Friday night "jump-
up" parties, locals
eat grilled seafood and
dance in the street.**

**OPPOSITE: Owners
Xavier and Michelle
Ribot and their kids
at the excellent Coal
Pot restaurant.**



Tennant is now developing a property nearby called the Beau Estate, a collection of private homes inspired by Mustique's exclusive, secluded villas.

I meet Tennant at Ladera's restaurant, Dasheene, for a delicious lunch of crispy breadfruit and saltfish cakes, plantain-stuffed roast pork and sweet potato-encrusted shrimp prepared by talented young chef Orlando Satchell. The 79-year-old Tennant explains to me that he doesn't want to sell the Beau Estate homes to just anyone: "When the Cotton House first opened on Mustique, we never charged anyone for rooms, but all the people who came were the right people. I don't want to sell the Beau Estate villas to a lot of brokers and bankers. They're for people who want to lead quiet, unsocial, though not antisocial, lives under the most wonderful circumstances."

Luckily, the most wonderful circumstances aren't hard to come by on St. Lucia, even for those whose real estate destinies will never intersect with Tennant's. The island, especially on the south side, is full of spots where I could easily spend hours—days, weeks—just drinking the bittersweet chocolate tea made from the local cocoa beans, staring at the views and "liming," a St. Lucian word that means lazing the hours away. But during my recent stay here I find I can't resist alternating hours of sloth with hours spent going on little adventures around the island.

The Piton mountains are about a half hour's drive from Ladera, and one morning I decide to take a mini-hike of Gros Piton, the broader one; ironically, given its name, Petit Piton is steeper and much more challenging to climb. The road to Gros Piton winds past a cocoa plantation called Union Vale Estate, one of many on St. Lucia. Some investors have expressed interest in building chocolate factories on the island over the coming years; for now, local cocoa farmers have to export

their cocoa beans to chocolate factories abroad. The soil around here is so fertile that the hillsides along the drive to Gros Piton are covered with dasheen plants (a type of taro), coconut palms and breadfruit trees.

The St. Lucia government encourages anyone hiking up the Pitons to take a guide since the treks can be tough and those who don't know the trails can get lost. Even though I'm planning to do only a dilettante's version of the climb, I stop at the visitor center at the base of Gros Piton to hire a chaperone. The guide I get is a pleasant, not too intimidatingly buff 16-year-old named Corinne, who laughs when I explain that I don't want to interrupt my blissed-out mood with anything too strenuous. She agrees to take me on a half-hour portion of the normally four-hour trek, and as we clamber up the rocky trail, she points out the tall white cedars, calabash trees and "peeling tourists"—trees with flaky brown bark that looks like the skin of an overzealous American sunbather on a flight back from the Bahamas. The walk up the trail is fairly steep, but the views and the mild cardio workout are exhilarating. Still, as I suspected, after half an hour I'm ready to hit the pool again.

More my speed than a grueling hike is a sport at which I used to excel as a kid, and which I seem to be even better at now: playing with mud. St. Lucia has exceptionally therapeutic mud baths, thanks to the sulfur that drifts into the springs from the island's long-dormant volcano. The best time to go to the baths is obscenely early in the morning; that's when they're nearly empty and the mud hasn't yet been heated by the sun. I make it there one day at 6 A.M., an hour when I'd usually much rather be unconscious. But as I discover, soaking in mud at the crack of dawn can be even better than sleeping. As I sit waist-deep in mud in the early-

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morning mist, groggily scooping cool black earth from the bottom of the bath and rubbing it on my skin, I feel like I'm hallucinating. Once I've covered my entire body, I get out of the bath, lie on my back and stare at the sky while the mud dries on me, then I rinse it off. My skin is now silkier than it's ever felt in my life. I wish I'd brought bottles so I could steal some mud and open a spa back home.

Near the mud baths are some ruins of the 18th-century mineral pools used by Empress Joséphine and the troops of King Louis XVI back when St. Lucia was a French colony; the island has switched from French to British rule 14 times, with Britain gaining control in the Treaty of Paris in 1814. The remains of those pools—two of which have been restored and are in operation—can be found in what is now the Diamond Botanical Gardens, full of meticulously landscaped flower beds and a natural waterfall. Walking around the garden, I spot amazing tropical plants I've never seen before: the wax rose, which looks, indeed, like a giant pink rose made of wax; the also aptly named crab-claw flower; and the lobster-claw plant, also known as a hummingbird bath because its giant scooplike buds collect rainwater. "Couples like to get married in this garden so they don't have to pay for flowers," jokes Alexander Gregory, a horticulture specialist I meet on my stroll.

This is the first time I've ever spent this much time in the Caribbean without running to the nearest beach. I've been too distracted by the mountains and gardens and the magical mud. But one afternoon I hop in one of the vans that runs several times a day from Ladera to Anse Chastanet. At the moment, Ladera's guests have access to Anse Chastanet's beach, which can be reached by a 100-step stone staircase. (Starting in December, Ladera will have its own beach, on nearby Anse Jambette Bay and

accessible by a boat shuttle from Soufrière.) Even on the sunny, cloudless day when I visit, there are surprisingly few people on the beach. I flop onto the silvery sand and read *Omeros*, an epic poem inspired by *The Iliad* and written—in part as a tribute to the island—by the St. Lucia-born, Nobel Prize-winning poet Derek Walcott. Like one of the poem's characters, I find my mind drifting "in detachment, like catatonic noon on the Caribbean Sea."

On my last day I'm ready to break my near-meditative trance, and I take an hour-and-a-half drive north to Castries, the capital, and to nearby Reduit Beach, which some consider St. Lucia's best beach. It's hard to fault Reduit's clean white sand and clear blue water, but I find the beach, especially around overdeveloped Rodney Bay, too busy for my taste. Still, I have fun wandering around the enormous, noisy and somewhat chaotic outdoor market in the center of Castries, drinking fresh coconut juice and examining piles of produce like *christophene* (the local name for chayote), callaloo (a leafy, spinachlike green), dasheen, plantains, mangoes and gooseberries.

I eat lunch at the Coal Pot, a little Caribbean-Creole restaurant that sits on a palm-lined wooden deck along a cove in a quiet part of town. There I meet French-born chef Xavier Ribot and his wife, Michelle, and try a freshly caught dorado with a tangy tomato-onion Creole sauce, sitting on top of mashed green figs (St. Lucian for green bananas). I wash it down with a glass of tart green-mango juice. Xavier tells me the couple took over the Coal Pot from Michelle's parents in 1997, and next year they're planning to open a Creole restaurant in a 150-year-old mansion above Castries, possibly with a design that evokes Caribbean life in the early 1900s.

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Whatever influence the trendy new hangouts and resorts opening soon, from Grace Leo-Andrieu and hip St. Lucians like the Ribots, end up having on the island's nightlife, it will be tough to beat the more down-home entertainment. Every Friday night, locals head to parties called "jump-ups" in fishing villages all over the island. On my last night in St. Lucia, I decide to go to the one in Anse La Raye, one of the biggest jump-ups and by many accounts the best. Chefs, seafood vendors and home cooks spend all afternoon setting up charcoal grills and preparing to serve their specialties—like red snapper, spiny lobster and crab—to the crowds, which start arriving, by sea and by land, at around 7 P.M.

As the sun goes down, the smell of fresh, charcoal-grilled seafood starts to waft through the air. I join the earliest arrivals in a procession down the main street, stopping to sample some buttery red snapper chargrilled in foil; a St. Lucian specialty called a crab back, made with a moist and slightly spicy crabmeat-and-onion mixture stuffed into a crab shell; and ice-cold Piton beer.

Around 11 P.M., a few people start drifting into the middle of the street, dancing to the beat of a steel-drum band playing the calypso-like local soca music. I'd been chatting with three thirtysomething visitors from Miami, and we all get up and join the dancers. Once the crowd begins to grow, I break away and take a walk around the village's residential backstreets, where a few people are sitting on patio chairs in the moonlight listening to the music. In the dim glow I can barely see anything, though I can hear music all around, and it feels like I have the sea and the mountains in the distance all to myself. I'm tempted to keep walking until I reach an empty stretch of sand and camp outside—really outside—for the night. ●

Greek Yogurt Panna Cotta with Honey-Glazed Apricots

TOTAL: 30 MIN PLUS 3 HR CHILLING

6 SERVINGS

Neumann describes this cool, delicate dessert as "just fruit and cream, barely sweetened. It has the qualities of custard without the egginess. Greek yogurt makes it wonderfully tangy." She tops the panna cotta with dried apricots that she's plumped in wine and honey, often adding a scattering of crunchy, salty toasted almonds or pistachios.

WINE PAIRING Honeysuckle-inflected 2005 Renwood Orange Muscat.

1 envelope unflavored gelatin
(2¼ teaspoons)

2 tablespoons cold water

1 cup heavy cream

½ cup sugar

1 vanilla bean, split, seeds scraped

One 17.6-ounce tub of Greek yogurt,
such as Fage Total brand (2 cups)

1 cup dried apricots

1 cup semi-dry white wine,
such as Vouvray

¼ cup honey

1. In a small bowl, sprinkle the gelatin over the cold water; let stand until softened, 5 minutes. In a small saucepan, bring the cream, sugar and vanilla bean and seeds to a simmer. Off the heat, stir in the gelatin until melted. In a bowl, whisk the yogurt until smooth. Gradually whisk in the vanilla cream; remove the vanilla bean. Pour the mixture into six ½-cup ramekins and refrigerate until set, at least 3 hours.
2. Meanwhile, in a small saucepan, simmer the apricots in the white wine over moderately low heat until the apricots are plump and the wine has reduced by half, about 20 minutes. Stir in the honey and simmer the syrup until thickened, about 5 minutes; let cool.
3. Run a knife around the inside of each ramekin. Set a plate on each ramekin and invert each panna cotta onto a plate; you may have to tap and shake the ramekins to loosen the panna cottas. Slice the apricots and spoon them on top of the panna cottas. Drizzle with some of the honey syrup and serve. ●