

ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES: A NATION WITH NO PLANS FOR MASS TOURISM

The islands Club Med forgot

String of pearls will remind visitors of the welcoming, mega-resort-free Caribbean of the past

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ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES -- I'm not a veteran Caribbean traveller, but I have travelled with some. And those in their sixth and seventh decades often speak of "the Old Caribbean," a place where warmth and sand were complemented by the hospitality of people who welcomed you to their homeland. Those war-wounded travellers, now also veterans of resorts that build walls to keep the natives out and take Canadian currency for rum drinks at their swim-up bars, make the Old Caribbean sound as lost as Atlantis.

But if they were to take out a magnifying glass and look closely at their maps, they might get a bead on that area between St. Lucia and Grenada and find St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the islands that Club Med forgot.

On my third of seven December mornings in the Caribbean, I'd planned to do something early but slept in instead. I walked out of cottage 17 on Young Island - a three-minute ride from the main island of St. Vincent in a boat the size of my sofa - onto my private patio, sat down on a big lounge chair and gazed across the harbour, revelling in the morning sun. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, I saw a big iguana ambling from somewhere behind me up onto the patio wall. I tossed him some melon from a fruit plate. He seemed to appreciate the gesture and stretched out a metre or two from me. I got up, took a quick outdoor shower and went down the 85 stone steps to the small beach to lie in a hammock. There was one family from what sounded like the British Midlands about 50 metres down the beach. And a couple enjoying a late-life vacation were flip-flopping back from a morning expedition into the reef-rich waters with their enormous underwater camera. But that was it. That was high season in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

For decades, this string of islands has been overshadowed by one overweening member of the group, Mustique - the Diana Ross to the chain's Supremes. Mustique is where Mick Jagger, Tommy Hilfiger, and Bryan Adams have places. Even in a country whose agrarian economy never quite recovered from an eruption of its volcano, La Soufrière, in 1902, the wealthy residents of Mustique, with their ravenous appetite for privacy, have convinced the rest of the nation to put resort prerequisites like an international airport a little further down their list of priorities. "They have no agenda for mass tourism," says Arie Raif, St. Vincent's tourism representative in Canada and

chairman of the newly formed Luxury Travel Shows Group. "So it's been left behind, overlooked by major brands and hotel chains." It's like I always say: What's good for Mick is good for me.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines consists of St. Vincent - 344 square kilometres - and 31 Grenadines, which account for the nation's other 45 square kilometres. You can fly to some, like Mustique, Bequia, Union and Canouan. Others, like the private Palm Island and Petit St. Vincent, are only accessible by sea.

Unless you want to stay put on one of those private islands, make St. Vincent your base and fly or sail back and forth to the others (return airfares among the islands are about \$50-\$60 with local airlines). If Young Island, with accommodations that range from about \$475 to \$1,200 a night, is not your speed, St. Vincent boasts many family-owned hotels in the \$100-\$200 range.

After a couple of days on the main island, climbing up the volcano (it's dormant, but you can look down from the peak into the 800-metre-wide crater with its still steaming - and growing - lava cap) and being taken through the Botanical Gardens by Randall, a groundskeeper and tour guide with an encyclopedic knowledge of the mostly arboreal flora and a predilection for the Latin names of things, I started the island-hopping part of my trip.

Union Island

It's the kind of island that puts the Turks and Caicos to shame. All the hotels are in the \$100 range, even the ones right on their own beaches. The downtown is almost devoid of tourist shops, and in the late afternoon you're more likely to see crowds of uniformed schoolgirls than packs of camera-wielding visitors looking for a perfect sunset shot. I ran into a German couple who ran across the Big Sand Hotel online and booked it on a whim. They decided to stay on Union for the entire week. "We love it," the woman said, after an hours-long hike through a rain forest and across beaches, during which they met a local man who joined them for some conversation along the way.

Palm Island

One of the four high-end private islands, give this one a skip. Its high-priced, low-end resort seems to cater to people who wish there was a \$500-a-night Best Western in the area. Bar food was Goldfish crackers. and the dessert menu included Swiss rolls with defrosted and refrozen vanilla ice cream. 'Nuff said.

Canouan

This larger island is dominated by the one resort that has taken a chance on the country. And what a resort. Raffles is a super-high-end Singapore-based chain that has taken the opposite approach from Palm. With a Trump golf course, private villas - each with its own golf cart - glass-bottomed, offshore spa rooms on stilts and an Italian

restaurant that takes its food very seriously, this place is among the most luxurious spots you're likely to find anywhere. The tortoises for which either the Arawaks or the Caribs named the island are everywhere. Oh, and the rates range from \$1,000 to \$10,000 a night.

Tobago Cays

A spattering of islands with reefs galore makes this one of the best snorkelling spots in the Caribbean. Take a catamaran from Union (Captain Yannis tours are about \$75 for the day, which includes two small meals and an open bar) and they'll make a stop in a bay where you can get your frolic on with some sea turtles.

Petit St. Vincent

With rates of \$900 a night for one of its 22 cottages, PSV is not for everybody, but the place is magnificent in the same way Young Island is, both having invested heavily in what might be called "modest perfection." The resort is owned by Bostonian Haze Richardson, who developed the place in 1962. Its system of flags lets the continuously roaming staff know whether you'd like privacy (red) or service (yellow).

But don't let Raffles and PSV throw you: St. Vincent and the Grenadines is not about the Borden (you know, the Canadian Benjamins). It's a place where you can stay a week for anything from \$700 to \$70,000 and feel like you've had a genuinely unique experience, not just another variation on the Holiday Inn playbook. But you'd better hurry: A huge new resort called Buccament Bay is on the way. Sounds like a floodgate opening to me.

Pack your flip-flops

Getting THERE

There are no direct flights from Canada to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. You can fly Caribbean Airlines (<http://www.caribbean-airlines.com>) into Trinidad, then Liat to the main island. Or you can get a flight on any number of airlines to Barbados, the other major gateway.

WHERE TO STAY

Young Island www.youngisland.com; 784-458-4826

Villa Lodge St. Vincent; <http://www.villalodgehotel.com>; 1-800-448-8355

Grand View St. Vincent; <http://www.grandviewhotel.com>; 784-458-4811

Raffles Canouan; <http://www.rafflescanouan.com>; 784-458-8000

Petit St. Vincent <http://www.psvresort.com>; 954-963-7401

things TO DO

Sailor Tours <http://www.sailortours.com>; 784-457-1712

Captain Yannis Tours 784-458-8513

The author was a guest of the St. Vincent and The Grenadines Ministry of Tourism (<http://www.svgtourism.com>).