

ISLAND OF RICHES

St Lucia's rainforest-cloaked hills and plunging coastline hide endless treasures for those in the know. *Cécile Gauert* rediscovers the island's chartering charms on board *Lady J*

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

At 2,424ft, Petit Piton is 154ft shorter than Gros Piton but much harder to climb



I have just touched the top of St Lucia's vertiginous Petit Piton and I did not even break a sweat. There is more than one way to get up close to this iconic rock: the hard way, with hiking shoes and ropes; or the easy way. Fortunately, the captain of *Lady J*, on charter in the Caribbean, has arranged for his guests to try the latter.

After a fast, dry ride on *Lady J's* 31ft Intrepid tender to the pretty Sugar Beach, my companions and I, giddy from our first night aboard the 141ft Palmer Johnson, pile into a van for the journey up the winding road that leads to the Tet Paul Nature Trail. Rufina, a native of the nearby village, guides us along the path, a young mother hen to a flock of tootling tourists. She rattles off the names of plants along the way: "This is the guigui tree, or porcupine tree. It is very spiky. Be careful as you are passing by." Birds seem to chirp in response to her clear laugh.

My attention veers from pineapples, sweet potatoes, bananas and jagged trees to the green hills that drop off into a purple horizon. Eventually, we walk far enough that the trail overlooks St Lucia's famous landmark. "This is the only spot on the island where you can see the Pitons this far apart," Rufina says. She asks if we want

Above: the pretty and natural harbor of Marigot Bay on St Lucia's west coast. Top left: Feadship *Bella Vita* at anchor in the shadow of Petit Piton. Left: the sound of tree frogs fills the air

a photo and demonstrates how to create the illusion that her finger is touching the summit of the 2,424ft Petit Piton. I follow suit – no sweat at all. Through some foliage, I spot *Lady J*, bobbing gently in the shade of the mountain. The yacht's captain, Allan Rayner, later tells me what he likes about St Lucia: "When you go on hikes you meet the locals and they explain everything to you. They are super friendly and happy just to chat."

Early the next morning I spin away on an exercise bike the crew has set up on the yacht's sundeck, watching wispy clouds wreath the emerald slopes. We share the anchorage in front of Sugar Beach, the Viceroy beach resort that was formerly the Jalousie Plantation, with only one other yacht. St Lucia, for all its beauty, numerous diving spots and two very good

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Below: *Lady J* and her 31ft tender take a break in the lush surroundings of Marigot Bay. Bottom: the crew set up a picnic on the beach near the village of Canaries

marinas, is not a magnet for superyachts, although the government is trying to change that by promoting the fairly liberal regulations relating to private and charter yachts. But it does take a bit more dedication to visit here than other traditional charter destinations. Getting to this island requires cruising through some deep water, and winter winds can make passages rough. The famous breezes, great for regattas, are not always ideal for serene passages on superyachts. Our original charter plan followed Captain Rayner's favorite itinerary, from St Lucia to Tobago Cay and the Grenadines (see page 202), but the forecast forced him to reconsider and stick to a lovely stretch of St Lucia's coast.

While other Caribbean islands including St Barths have carved a ►



Right: Capella Marigot Bay Marina has 42 berths and can accommodate yachts up to 262ft in length and 24ft in draft.
Below: the Kai Koko Spa at Ti Kaye Resort in Anse Cochon



reputation as the place to see and be seen – any captain who’s tried to get a slip in Gustavia over the Christmas and New Year period knows this pain – St Lucia is more discreet. But that is part of the island’s charm and probably why it is such a sought-after getaway spot for honeymooners, celebrities and charter guests who are looking for a different experience. “I think St Lucia attracts your most adventurous type,” says Rayner, “people who are into diving, hiking, and want to see the more rugged sort of Caribbean. The same goes for the Tobago Cays and the Grenadines. St Lucia is secluded. You do your own thing on the boat. And it’s just incredible anchorages.”

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St Lucia is the third largest of the five major Windward Islands and, at 238 square miles, it really is quite small. The longest distance as the crow flies from north to south is 27 miles, and from east to west is 14 miles. A few roads snake around big hills covered with thick jungle. It shares natural and topographical similarities with Martinique, the island 25 miles to the north, but St Lucia is far less developed, particularly when it comes to its infrastructure. Thankfully, it was not affected by hurricane Irma and Maria.

Its topography may be why the fierce Caribs fared better here than on other

islands. But it did not prevent St Lucia from getting caught in the tug of war of imperialism, a history embedded in the culture. The official language is English, which Derek Walcott, the late poet, playwright and the island’s Nobel laureate, used masterfully, but a colorful patois is also widely spoken, and French names pepper the map. The island’s beauty and natural volcanic treasures were also said to have attracted to St Lucia the first wife of Napoleon Bonaparte, Empress Josephine, whose father had an estate here.

Alongside its adventure credentials and rich history, wellness is also very much at the heart of tourism here and the island is dotted with resorts and spas offering treatments that incorporate local products. A tempting “sweet surrender” chocolate wrap is on the menu at laid-back Ti Kaye Resort & Spa, which clings to the steep hill above Anse Cochon. More treats are on offer at Capella Marigot Bay Resort and Marina, which *Lady J* often calls home when in St Lucia. One of the Caribbean’s prettiest bays, its water ►

We are treated to lunch at Jade Mountain, overlooking the Pitons. I sip green gazpacho and take in the view

turns from jade to gold as the sun descends at the end of the afternoon, and the humming of motorboats is soon replaced with the sound of tree frogs and music ricocheting across the water from a casual bar named Doolittle's. The Auriga Spa at Capella offers an enticing honey and nutmeg exfoliation treatment and traditional rub techniques, exclusive to St Lucia and involving bamboo sticks.

I decide to continue my exploration in wellbeing with a tasting of some of St Lucia's molasses-based rums aged in Bourbon barrels at Capella resort's rum cave. I have no trouble any evening falling asleep between recently refurbished *Lady J*'s silky sheets (made from the finest long staple combed 100 per cent Egyptian cotton). Fortunately, it's only a short walk to the dock from this rum haven.

If you don't plan on being tucked up in one of five cabins by 10pm, head to the north-west end of the island, which is especially lively at the end of the week. Fish Fry Jump Up Fridays expunge the stresses of the working week with free-flowing Piton beer or spiced rum, served with fried fish or chicken, and music getting louder as the night advances. It is particularly lively in Castries near Rodney Bay, home to the island's original superyacht marina, now part of the IGY marina network.

Our program in St Lucia blends great onshore and onboard experiences. We are treated to lunch at Jade Mountain, Nick Troubetzkoy's spectacular resort overlooking the Pitons. I sip green gazpacho and take in the view, one of St Lucia's best. Next stop is the resort's chocolate lab, where we are shown how to transform chocolate from the nearby Emerald Estate into fudge bars.

The chef on *Lady J* also uses the local chocolate to create sweets, truffles and

other sinful treats. He sends these from the galley after each meal, no matter how elaborate and even after a seven course wine pairing menu. My favorite among the delicious offerings this evening is the pairing of a Chilean pinot noir with forest mushroom and truffle risotto. Each meal is a surprise, with fresh edible flowers, purple cotton candy, homemade goat's cheese with seawater, and sweet or savory profiteroles, which the chef teaches us how to make in his galley.

No amount of jet skiing, swimming or paddleboarding – we did not have time to try any of the rainforest's numerous zip lines – can offset these delightful culinary adventures. But who cares? The nightly note on my bedside table reads: "We are here to laugh at the odds and live our lives so well that death will tremble to take us."

Lady J's incursions into the picturesque



Jade Mountain rises steeply above Anse Chastanet beach. It has 24 "infinity pool sanctuaries" overlooking the mighty Pitons as well as its own chocolate lab



bays of St Lucia's west coast prove equally full of surprises. The crew organizes a barbecue lunch on a small beach near the fishing village of Canaries, a place that is just as colorful as the birds of that name. The long table set on a narrow stretch of sand affords views of strewn driftwood, as if cast by an artist's hand, against a backdrop of clear waves and deeper blues further out. A couple of villagers engage the crew in some banter for a while, but then leave us to enjoy a feast on their beach.

We cruise just a few miles along the coast, from Marigot Bay to Rodney Bay and back, but it feels like we've traveled quite far and ventured way off the beaten path. St Lucia is still a pristine experience, a taste of the authentic Caribbean, a delicious blend of nature and laid-back luxury. I'd recommend that you go now while it still is a bit of a secret. Just make sure you don't tell anyone else. ■