

Jewel of the West Indies, St. Lucia

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From May 16-24, 2010, my daughter Becky Etzler and I explored this wonderful green island that is 27 miles long and 14 miles wide, located in the Lesser Antilles not far north of Venezuela. Martinique lies 21 miles north of St. Lucia, while St. Vincent is 26 miles south. Only the northeastern third of the island remains without roads, but most of it, especially the mountainous center, is happily rain forest.

About half of the island's 160,000 or so residents live in the northwest in Castries, the capital, and Gros Islet. The history of St. Lucia is not unlike that of most of the islands in the Antilles. Warlike Carib Indians drove the Arawak Indians off the island in 800 A.D. Caribs, pirates, French, and English all fought

over the island, but finally St. Lucia gained its independence in 1979. Today, the St. Lucians speak English and a type of Creole, and most of the place names are French.

Becky and I left Charlotte, NC on US Air for the 4 ½-hr flight due south to St. Lucia. Several of the islands in the Antilles were visible from the plane. Hewanorra International Airport is located in Vieux Fort on the southern tip of the island. Our wonderful first three-day accommodation, Fond Doux

Holiday Plantation, was located on the southwest side of the island only a couple of miles south of the charming city of Soufriere, and very near the twin Pitons (peaks), Gros Piton at 2,618' and Petit Piton at 2,438'. The sight of these magnificent peaks from the air was nothing less than spectacular, especially after having seen them so many times in the literature on St. Lucia. In the airport parking lot, it

the crow flies to Fond Doux. The road is similar all the way north to Castries.

Fond Doux was purchased by the present St. Lucian owners about 10 years ago. They have made a world class, eco-friendly resort out of what had been a 250-year old cocoa plantation. The grounds and some of the old buildings were renovated including historic cottages

and 2 houses, some of which were transported from other places. Our cottage was located on a hillside overlooking the whole plantation. From the porch vantage point, 2 life birds were observed: 3 endemic Gray Tremblers down below and 2 Lesser Antillean



was nice to observe a pair of gorgeous Antillean Euphonias (used to be Blue-headed Euphonias) in the trees overhead.

The road from the airport to our plantation was a humdinger: narrow, very curvy, and having driving on the left which is very nonsensical and stressful, especially with a deep concrete drainage ditch along the side of the road instead of a shoulder. My guess is that it probably took an hour or so to drive the approximately 12 miles as

Swifts flying by. Gorgeous Purple-throated Carib and Antillean Crested Hummingbirds were common in the plantation's extensive gardens as were Lesser Antillean Finches. Some other birds found were Grey Kingbirds, Black-whiskered Vireos, and Caribbean Elaenia. American Kestrels, Broad-winged Hawks and very large Scaly-necked Pigeons (formerly Red-necked Pigeon) were often fly-bys observed from our great front porch.

Two delightful restaurants staffed



by delightful folks had excellent choices of interesting meals. A favorite dinner drink was Planter's Punch (the first being complimentary). A funny story is related to the menu. When Becky and I came down the hill that first evening for dinner at the Jardin Cacao Restaurant, we saw that the menu entrees ranged in price from \$40.00-\$70.00. We said "We can't afford that!" Turns out prices were in Eastern Caribbean (E.C.) dollars where \$2.70 E.C. = \$1.00 US. We ate a bit light that first evening, but once the dollar shock was corrected, our other 2 meals were outstanding.

Breakfast at the Cocoa Pod was complimentary with a good selection, especially fresh cut tropical fruits. The building is open to the air and incorporates some ancient rock walls still standing from the old pig pen. For one breakfast, an Antillean Crested Hummingbird joined us, nectaring on flowers 10' away. Additionally, Lesser Antillean Finches often came right on the table looking for tidbits, and a few years earlier, they were so scarce on the island of St. John.

We watched one of the employees make fresh cocoa sticks that are then dried and grated to use in making cocoa tea, their version of hot cocoa which was available every morning. We noted that the big main dining room was being readied for use and found that there would be 2 busloads of boat people for lunch. Some of the big cruise ships that stop at Castries have passengers who sign up for different activities, one of which is a visit and lunch at the world heritage site Fond Doux. Lucky them!

Nearby Fond Doux are many attractions: the charming town of Soufriere, the twin pitons, wonderful Diamond Falls and Botanic Gardens, La Soufriere Sulphur Springs and Volcano, and Edmond Forest Preserve. Becky and I spent most of a day exploring the preserve deep in the interior of southern St. Lucia. The "road" east of Soufriere was a 4-wheel drive road for the most part, but we made it with much maneuvering in our little Yaris. At a point quite high up in the rain forest, we parked, paid a high entrance fee (\$10 US/person) and started hiking on the

Descartiers Trail. We walked about 1 ½ miles of the 6-mile trail which was an old road with easy terrain. By the end of our hike, we had logged 2 single, endangered, endemic St. Lucia Parrots, and heard 3 more. We also watched a pair of feeding endemic St. Lucia Orioles for several minutes. An amazing sight was a hillside solid with Anthuriums.

The second morning was spent shopping in Soufriere at one of the few grocery stores seen on the island, then it was down to the waterfront to enjoy a picnic lunch. It should be noted that away from the waterfront, parts of Soufriere are in poor condition and everywhere in Soufriere are beggars (who are very polite). At dock, we saw the replica of a pirate ship, the two-masted brig "Unicorn." It takes tourists on outings along the west coast of the island and was used in Pirates of the Caribbean. We watched it come in at Pigeon Island in the north a few days later. At the volcanic site, a pair of brightly-colored endemic St. Lucia Warblers came into close range for several minutes. They look similar to Adelaide's Warblers, which Becky and I had seen a few years earlier in Puerto Rico.

Becky wanted to do some snorkeling, so on our fourth-day drive north to our hotel at Gros Islet, the snorkeling site Anse Chastenet was on the way. She spent a happy hour with the marine life, though the Barracudas made her nervous, while I chatted with one of the natives. Several Brown Boobies were fly-bys. The drive from there to Castries was on the torturous side, but laced with several spectacular views down to the ocean. Castries itself was not easy to

navigate because of traffic congestion and the usual narrow roads, but from there to Gros Islet it was fine. Our Bay Gardens Hotel was in a fairly commercial area, but within walking distance of a small mall, grocery store, and restaurants. I found that the islanders did not have a taste for iced-tea anywhere, unfortunately for me since it's my favorite beverage. "Oh well Dad!" as Becky would say.

Our plan while up north was to visit Pigeon Island National park of great historical importance going back to St. Lucia's beginnings with the Arawaks. British Admiral Rodney built a fort (now in ruins) on the "island" which more recently was joined to the main island by a causeway. Becky and I hiked up to a major lookout (used by the US during WWII), affording spectacular views in all directions, especially back towards Rodney Bay and the city of Gros Islet. It was said that the British also used the lookout to spy on French fleet movements at Martinique 21 miles distant. Becky was especially enamored with the Snooty Agouti, a unique restaurant at water's edge where we thoroughly enjoyed lunch looking out over the Bay. Pigeon Island was quite arid, but there were lots of Zenaida Doves, several Common Ground Doves, and Gray Kingbirds.

We tried to find 3 or 4 places in the northwest coast and interior shown on our not-so-great maps and found none of them, one of which would have been a good birding area. A major problem is that road signs for smaller roads are almost nonexistent. The guide books for St. Lucia all say that visitors need local guides on all trails



(we didn't use guides) but it seems a guide is necessary to find most of the trails. We did luck into a great evening thanks to our Bay Gardens Hotel and their sister inn next door. They sponsored a poolside party with all the trimmings—a Caribbean band, free drinks including Planter's Punch and coconut rum, delicious hors-de-oeuvres, three vendors including a fine jewelry merchant and an island food company (who gave samples), and an amazing group of fire-wielding limbo acrobats. How many of you knew that the limbo originated in the West Indies?

After 2 nights in Gros Islet, we were off to our final destination, Fox Grove Inn near Micoud on the southeast coast. Unfortunately, Castries had to be navigated once again making it the fourth time; however this time, at a busy intersection, one of the few policemen we saw on the whole trip motioned at us to go on (we thought), but when he caught up to us at the next light we found he was pulling us over. After listening to his English that we didn't understand and explaining we didn't know what we

were doing, when I finally asked, "what do you want me to do?" he said with resignation, "have a nice day," and we were on the road again. We're still not exactly sure what we did. Whew! Finally we found the main road that went over the mountains to the East Coast. At the apex was the trailhead for the Barre de L'Isle forest trail that we planned to take to the summit of Mount La Combe at 1,442'. Again the charge was \$10 US each! The first mile and a half or so was of moderate toughness, but then we came to the end of the maintained trail segment and decided to trek on. It turned out to be one of the toughest trails I've ever attempted, much of it being made of steep, earthen stairs. Luckily there was a nice thick rope strung hip high alongside as an aid. The rainforest along this part of the trail was awesome with a few truly whopper trees. Some of the trees were Mahoe, Mahogany, and Pine. At the summit, we were a bit disappointed that only the view to the East was visible, but we could see all the way to the Atlantic. Trees and brush had been allowed to grow on the other sides, obliterat-

ing the other views. We saw quite a few banana plantings below on the east, essentially the first we had seen thus far. Along the trail were a dozen bird species, with excellent looks at 4 Pearly-eyed Thrashers (a life bird), Stolid Flycatcher, 3 Black-whiskered Vireos, 6 Grey Kingbirds and another pair of St. Lucia Orioles. Of course the hike back was easier.

The road on the east side was apparently newer than on the west side, thus was much straighter and wider. Our first coastal town on the East side was Dennery, located about half way on the island. Micoud, our destination for our last 2 ½ days, was another 7 miles or so down the coast. Our Fox Grove Inn was situated on a hill about a mile distant from the coast allowing a superb view of the whole coast from our second story room and balcony. Each guest is greeted first by an amazing Akita dog usually stretched out on the cool tiles of the outer entrance hallway. Three other small dogs had the run of the inn. The pool was a welcome pastime since the inn wasn't air conditioned. It was deep enough to dive into, unlike the pool at Bay Gardens which was only waist deep the entire length. Just beyond the pool was a stable with a few good-looking horses. We sat on the shady balconies trying to catch a breeze and drank milkshakes flavored with the excellent local cocoa to beat the daytime heat. In the evenings Becky and I even got in a little ping pong and billiards.

Complimentary breakfast at the

inn was great, especially the fresh fruit and what they called cherry juice. But this particular cherry juice, which was delicious, was made from a cultivated cherry like our Florida-grown Barbados Cherry or Surinam Cherry. The outdoor balcony dining room overlooked the panorama out to the Atlantic, creating a most pleasant setting. Dinners were tops, especially after



I showed our fine waitress how to make iced tea. I just had her bring a pot of hot water, a tea bag, 2 glasses of ice, and lemon and voila! It's what I do at home.

Perhaps about 2 miles up the road was Mamiku Gardens. On our visit there, we hiked all the trails, including one that went to the site of a 1796 battle between the British and the French. Sound like some of our US history? On this trip, we always had trouble keeping enough

small change around to pay for small purchases (a 20 dollar US bill is a 50 to them), and we ran into the problem yet again as we tried to pay for admission into the gardens and later for ice cream in the snack shop. Luckily the friendly snack shop personnel let us owe them till the next day, and even let us trade for some neat E.C. coins as gifts for the grandkids. These gardens were a big step down from the magnificent Diamond Botanical Gardens, but we sure enjoyed the ice cream.

One morning we spent time taking the short guided walk to LaTille Waterfall situated in an organic garden and cashew grove. Along the trail we came upon a very large, dark, butterfly bigger than our Eastern Tiger Swallowtail having a distinct orange bar across the hind wing. The butterfly looked like a big brown leaf when resting. Thanks to the Coopers, the butterfly was identified as an Orion Cecropian. On our return from the waterfall, the butterfly was still flitting about in the same area. A group of students with their teacher had driven from

Castries to visit the compound, and the caretaker, a most interesting fellow, was teaching them about sustainable living. I took a picture of the gang and plan to send copies to them.

On the east coast, we struck out again trying to find places on the map. Without luck, we tried to find the East Coast Trail (apparently mostly ruined because of new resort development and the home of the endangered endemic



White Breasted Thrasher), and the east end of the Descartiers Trail which we looked for on a country road that deteriorated until becoming impassable among very old cocoa, lime, and banana plantings. In the grassy areas were several Black-faced Grassquits with Bananaquits frequenting the shrubbery. Also, the Makote Mangrove Swamp was not in evidence, just dry brush/mangroves accessed via an extremely uneven road that

threatened to hang up our little car. Because of a drought, there was no water, thus no Mangrove Cuckoos or other birds that normally inhabit Mangroves. But we did make it to a very nice beach where a few locals were swimming, barbecuing, and collecting some local fruit growing on beach shrubs. We could see Anse de Sables lighthouse on a hill at the extreme south end of the island.

I think Becky and I probably maxed out our time on the island. It had been another fine adventure and was just about over. We observed 40 species of birds, 7 of which were lifers and 4 of these being endemic. Wild animals were scarce, but we did see 4 Mongoose, unhappily for the local wildlife. Apparently Agoutis are there too, but we saw none. Several butterfly species were observed, at least 3 of which we have in Florida: Gulf Fritillary, Tropical Buckeye (which I have seen at Ft. De Soto with the late great naturalist, John Edscom), and several White Peacocks. I have already mentioned the very large Orion Cecropian.

As the Pitons disappeared under the wing of our Airbus, and Martinique came into view, we knew our island adventure was over, and it had been another memorable trip.

