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Life is a carnival in vibrant St Lucia – an island throbbing with Caribbean charm

Dance with a complete stranger? I'd love to!

by Frances Hardy

THERE'S something about a Caribbean carnival that induces even the most buttoned-up of Britons to abandon their inhibitions.

As the procession pauses beside us, we applaud decorously and suddenly, before I can object, I'm sucked into the

eddy of swirling bodies by a cheeky St Lucian with a bare torso and a spangly loincloth.

For a few giddy minutes I'm no longer an observer, but a participant in this joyful, noisy parade and dancing with a stranger.

These are the special moments of a holiday: when you feel not so much a tourist in an alien land as a welcomed guest.

St Lucia's carnival clogs the streets of its principal town, Castries, for the best part of 24 hours, snaking like some sinuous bejewelled serpent through its heaving streets.

The colours are dizzying, the heat broiling and the din head-spinning, and we all enjoy it:

that's middle-aged Iain and me, plus Amy and her friend Megan, both 17, who are courteously propositioned by posers of local boys all afternoon.

St Lucia is an island mercifully untouched by the constraints of political correctness. We watch a glorious pageant of beauty queens who wave graciously at wolf-whistling men in the crowd.

We applaud indiscriminately: the steel band, the portly women in tasselled bikinis, the close-coupled, gyrating dancers. It's bawdy, joyful and loud. Street vendors set up their cool boxes and stoves. We





feast, for £1.50, on chicken wings, curried potato and deep-fried dough cakes.

At the end of the day we rattle back to base in a cab blaring the local 'soca' music from its vast speakers. Our amiable driver Lee-Roy, a special constable when he isn't chauffeuring, gives the girls a CD.

'Suzette, Mama said Don't Join the Fete,' counsels the chorus of the carnival week hit. But, of course, we all did — and we wouldn't have missed it.

The St Lucians, it seems, need no excuse for a knees-up. In May, there's the Jazz Festival — Chaka Khan headlines next year — and in November there is the celebratory party that greets the Atlantic Rally Cruisers as they end their yacht race at Rodney Bay.

On a more modest scale, every Friday night there's the Jump-Up at the fishing village of Gros Islet. Ad-hoc bars and food stalls spring up to cater for a horde of nocturnal guests.

If you arrive unfashionably early — as we did — you'll be beset by shoals of winsome, wide-eyed children selling trinkets, and the local characters will ask for drinks in return for rambling anecdotes.

But by 10pm the main street is heaving with tourists and locals, and a reggae beat pulses from giant speakers. The girls have dived off into the throng and even the most curmudgeonly among us is dancing.

Finding a holiday to suit four people, with interests as diverse as ours, can be a tricky proposition — especially when two of you are teenagers.

We're guests of Helen and Theo Gobat, who have three grown sons and grandchildren of their own, so they know the score. They have developed

Cap Maison, a five-star boutique hotel occupying a prime coastal site with gasp-inducing views over the Caribbean, in the far north of the island.

Cap Maison, set in lush tropical gardens, has been open for nine months and typifies the new breed of smart hotels that are colonising the once-primitive island.

It is made up of villas — so families may stay together — and suites, many with a private plunge pool; their terraces and balconies bright with indigenous flowers. Every luxury is on tap: valets, private chefs, a walk-in wine cellar and spa.

And there's a bit of something for everyone. The girls race down the zig-zag steps to Smuggler's Cove beach to snorkel, Iain goes to the gym and I opt for a massage (a complementary one is offered to every guest) in my room rather than on the Champagne Deck, right beside the gently lapping Caribbean.

It is, for sedentary adults at least, a pleasant feature of Cap Maison that there are no noisy water sports at the hotel to disrupt the calm — unless you count the luxury motor yacht available to guests for day-trips and cruises.

But Amy and Megan are keen to water-ski. Unaccountably, their idea of fun is also being towed out to sea at giddy speed by a motorboat, while sitting on a tyre. (It's called tubing).

A day pass to Le Sport resort, a short walk away on Caribblue Bay, secures limitless activities of this sort with like-minded teenagers, all supervised by a genial former St Lucian rugby prop called Gaspar; a man who makes Mr T of The A Team look Lilliputian.

Iain, meanwhile, has potted off to the nearby St Lucia Golf and Country Club to play a few holes — and me? I'm just sitting under a parasol with a cool drink and a good book, by a sea that glitters like cut amethysts.

Marked an 'absolute must' in our guide book are the Diamond Botanical Gardens, Mineral Baths and Waterfall south of the town of Soufriere on the island's west coast.

The drive, in our hired 4x4, takes us along hilly roads that zig-zag through impoverished villages, past banana plantations and grand old estate

houses.

There is a fine view of the Pitons — the two volcanic peaks through which Superman flew in the second film, bearing a bouquet of Bird of Paradise flowers — as we switchback down into Soufriere. (If you slow up for a traffic light or to ask directions take note: you'll be assailed by locals offering to be your tour guide or by street vendors toting armfuls of beaded necklaces with lines in sales patter that make Alan Sugar's apprentices seem tongue-tied.)

At the gardens, we amble through a lush tropical paradise in which heliconia, tree fern, begonias and peace lilies flourish in the humid heat.

Just as we plunge into the communal outdoor baths — built by King Louis XVI when his troops were on the island — a tropical rainstorm deluges us. We duck our heads under the sulphurous waters and emerge with hair that is slippery smooth as if salon-conditioned.

Afterwards, the trail takes us back through fragrant frangipani, red ginger and hibiscus groves, bright with darting hummingbirds and bullfinches.

If this was a day for the adults — expressly me, with my passion for pootling around gardens — the next big outing, to the Rain Forest Sky Rides in Chassin, was aimed at the girls. The first bit — a sedate glide high above the forest canopy in a modified ski-lift — was a tranquil prelude to the main event: rocketing across a dozen dizzying ravines on a series of zip lines, each one more vertiginous than the last.

I had to be coaxed. Then, once I'd made my first zip — and hadn't plummeted headlong onto a forest floor writhing with boa constrictors — I admit, I began to enjoy myself.

We all loved St Lucia; not least for its capacity to surprise and delight. Of course, we could have basked in round-the-clock luxury and indolence within the confines of our hotel. But teenagers crave excitement and adventure. Had they not been with us, we would doubtless have returned blissfully restored and rested. As it was, we also had a great deal of high-spirited fun.



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TRAVEL FACTS

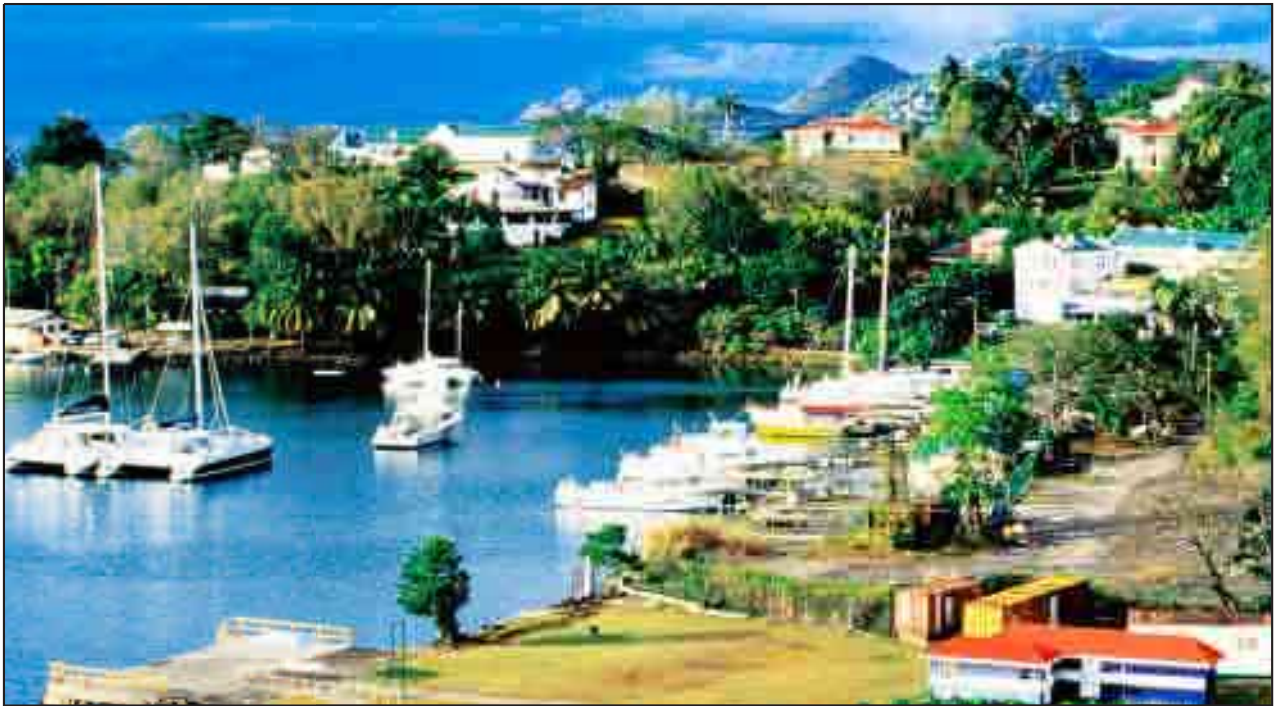
BRITISH AIRWAYS (0844 4930758, ba.com/stlucia) offers seven nights at the four-star **Cap Maison** in St Lucia from £1,587pp for departures in November 2009. Price includes direct return flights from London Gatwick and accommodation only. Subject to availability, based on two sharing and includes all UK taxes.

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Deceptively calm: The marina at Castries basks in the sun, but at nightfall it's party time