

Natural Luxury

A private island escape in St. Vincent and the Grenadines yields rustic glamour with a spritz of ritz.

BY DOUG WALLACE

The eight-seater Mustique Airways plane on the Barbados airport tarmac is painted a bright aquamarine and there are only five of us sitting in its white leather seats, including the two pilots. For the next 50 minutes, we head straight into the sunset, just brushing the tops of the cotton-ball clouds, lost in thoughts of absolutely nothing, dumbfounded by the beauty of the sky. As we make straight for the lower Grenadine Islands and Petit St. Vincent (PSV), a 115-acre private-island resort, my grin slowly turns into a smile that lasts all week long.

I step out of the cabin cruiser onto the dock and a perfect Piña Colada is thrust into my hand, along with a wet towel and a welcoming handshake. We then hop into a little powder-blue fibreglass jeep for a quick spin around. I'm sizing up the delicate balance between luxury and nature, of the old-school charm and the posh amenities. People are just beginning to congregate at the beachfront bar for rum punches. What turns out to be the staff soccer team practices on the front lawn. Butlers driving identical jeeps smile and wave as we meander to my cottage.







You don't get to be a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World overnight, of course. Opened in 1968 and celebrating its 50th anniversary, PSV is legendary within travel circles for its stunning and secluded 22 one- and two-bedroom villas, for the five-star service and food, and for not changing a thing in 50 years, including its signature flag system for room service. Well, that's not entirely true. When new management took over from the original owners in 2011, certain things were brought up to date, the luxury stepped up with a general facelift. But while the air conditioning and the Balinese spa may be new, the vibe is still strictly 1960s.

The lo-fi nature of the place well suits the unstuffy attitude of the guests despite the cost. The cast of characters is well-heeled for sure. I spend my time eavesdropping and making friends with semi-retirees, couples taking a romantic break, special-occasion celebrants and families carving out a bit of together-time.

PSV cottages and villas have a rustic feel—brick walls, exposed ceilings with fans, wooden lamps, sideboards a bit tacky from the varnish and the humidity. It's island living with a dash of ritz and a ton of aircon—or not: Two walls of a spacious living room open out onto my private veranda overlooking the ocean. Little bananaquits and grackles make themselves at home splashing about in the ceramic bowl of water meant for washing the sand off my feet. Aloe vera grows wild on the island and the cottage gardens are abundant with it, which comes in really handy when the sunny afternoons fool you into thinking you're immune to its rays.

At both the multi-terraced main pavilion and the toes-in-the-sand beach restaurant, I find myself frequently asking the servers, "How would you have it prepared if you were eating it?" This always works. You can also request a picnic and enjoy it anywhere on the island, beach or bluff, or ask for a little spot on the beach to be set up for a romantic dinner for two. Everyone aims to please. The kitchen grows as much of its own food as possible, of course. Besides the chef garden, there are eggs from organic chickens and banana, almond, papaya and citrus trees.

I spend lunchtimes staring out at the boats moored on the sheltered leeward side of the island, wondering what the people on-board are doing, where they're from, the answer being: from all over. I devour melt-in-my-mouth tuna ceviche and beautifully grilled snapper. I talk to my food so loudly that I notice the neighbours noticing—and I'm not embarrassed.

The Jean-Michel Cousteau Caribbean Diving Center opened here in 2014, a counterpoint to the diving legend's famous scuba program in Fiji. The team at PSV caters to everyone from beginners to pros with a variety of instruction, opening visitors up to about 20 dive sites, all within a relatively short distance of the main pier. Besides the tons of colourful reef fish, I see more eels than I've ever seen in one weekend for sure, plus a few rays, scorpion fish, squid, lobster, crabs and sharks—some sleeping, some annoyed. One of the dive masters spears more than a dozen lion fish, which then find their way onto my lunch plate back at the beach restaurant, pan-fried and swimming in butter. This is exactly the kind of simple little fillip that gives PSV its extraordinary charm—the icing on the fish cake.

The coral, too, is really healthy, thanks to the Diving Center's emphasis on educating the guests and the inhabitants of the surrounding islands that protecting the ocean will result in a healthier reef and more wildlife.

The sea turtle I follow around as he eats his lunch from the ocean floor a few days later is a case in point. After a ride on the resort sailboat the Beauty on a day excursion to nearby Tobago Cays Marine Park, a five-island grouping about an hour's sail away, I snorkel the reef and then spot a turtle the size of an ottoman. I watch him for a blissful half hour as he munches away on sea grass, not caring a lick that he has an admirer. It wasn't that long ago that turtle hunters severely thinned out this crowd, in the days before the park was a protected area.

This kind of eco-sensibility is evident throughout PSV, from the coral nursery on the island's Atlantic side to the paper straws in the drinks to the goat that was tethered near my cottage. She chews her crop

circle of grass down to the quick, then someone moves her peg and she begins anew with fresh grass. Her kid, who I meanly refer to as Glovie, scampers around her, not straying very far. Yes, there are lawn mowers, but it never hurts to have lo-fi backup. These sustainability practices are part of the reason PSV is one of National Geographic's Unique Lodges of the World, a collection of hotels committed to sustainability, authenticity and excellence. The other biggie here is the fact that there's fresh drinking water from every tap thanks to a state-of-the-art desalination plant.

My goats hang out at the entrance to the yoga pavilion, which looks out onto a lone stretch of beach on a cove called Conch Bay. I participate in a morning yoga-slash-qi-gong session to get a renewed sense of energy, before wading into the bay to let the waves wash over me and the yoga experience sink in. Hummingbirds seem to follow me to the shoreline and then a few jumping fish take over. At some point, I start thinking about lunch and what corner of the island I'm going to enjoy it in.

When it's time to check out, I fly back the way I came, but the plane makes a few stops at a couple of nearby islands first, which gives me a chance to scour the hillsides for my next Grenadines getaway. And yes, I smile the whole time.

Visiting in May, June, July and November will net you the most attractive rates and the smallest crowds, not that this place ever feels crowded. Special offers, such as two nights free when you book five, crop up regularly. Mustique Airways flies to Union Island, where a PSV boat collects you for a 20-minute cruise to the resort pier. Rates from BBD\$2,400 per night based on double occupancy, and this includes meals. Visit PetitStVincent.com.

