

The unexpected paradise of St. Lucia

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Special to the Local News

It was a hat.

My new wife, cringing behind the railing of our mountain-top villa, was convinced the nocturnal creature that had flitted into our living space was one of our neighbors from a nearby cliff crag appropriately known as the Bat Cave. Meanwhile I, indulging in a moment of husbandly heroics, stayed cool and investigated.

The creature lit upon one of the ubiquitous fish wall carvings and I approached. No fear. No fangs, but it definitely had wings. It took a moment, but after I had



GROS PITON AND PETIT PITON
...looming over the St. Lucia shoreline

convinced myself of the improbable sight, I announced to the upper floor of our villa our newest discovery on the West Indian jewel of St. Lucia.

It was a moth. A really big moth. An insect of prehistoric proportions might nearly another resort should the incident be mentioned in print, but not the folks at Ladera, one of the island's best kept secrets and home to one of the Caribbean's most spectacular views.

The rooms and villas perched along the mountains more than 1,000 feet above the bay of Anse Piton play host to all sorts of critters day and night - at any moment there could be hummingbirds, lizards and small lizards - because they lack a "fourth wall." Where any other resort might make do with French doors to a balcony to take advantage of the breathtaking view, Ladera has literally opened the rooms to the outdoors.

What results is a wide-open panorama that is positively charismatic, whether from the sun deck, four-poster bed or mosaic-tiled shower.

To the left and right are Gros Piton and Petit Piton, respectively, the twin symbols of the island nation. Each formed from the lava plugs of long-extinct volcanoes, the lush green Pitons and the azure sky offer a dazzling prospect to the bay below and the Caribbean beyond. The stone-and-wood construction, hardwood floors and antique furnishings in the villas and rooms, as well as the mosquito netting on

the beds, create an atmosphere of rustic charm - somewhere between "Key Largo" and "Paraná" - that in no way detracted from our comfort.

Facing the leeward side of the island, Ladera's suites and villas are situated to make the best of the constant West Indian trade winds and at the same time limit the guests' exposure to the weather.

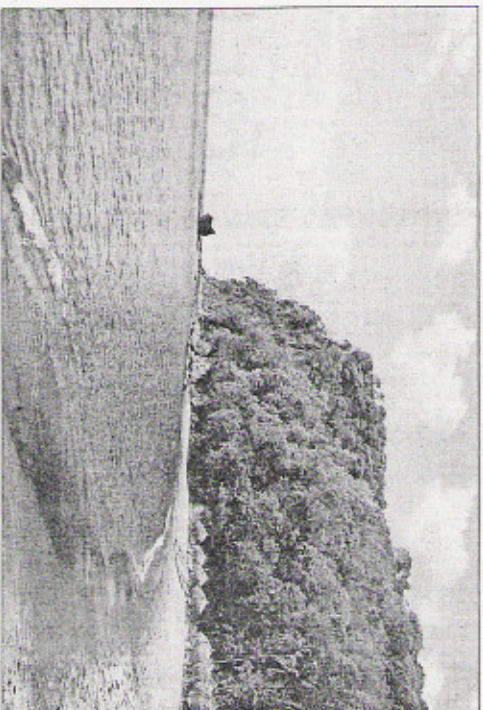
During our stay in June, St. Lucia's rainy season, not a drop from one of the intermittent (and occasionally heavy) showers ventured any farther into our villa than the partially roofed private sun-deck. The presence of a 6-foot-deep plunge pool in our unit and the absence of tele-phones or televisions completed the idyllic picture.

But just because the rooms lack some conveniences (or, if you're like us, hurricanes), it doesn't mean Ladera is in any way lacking in service or amenities. Disheene, Ladera's on-site restaurant, is widely hailed as the best on the island, and proves why on a nightly basis. The creations put forth by chef Orlando Satchell are masterpieces of Caribbean-Asian-Italian fusion cooking, all featuring locally grown or caught ingredients.

Dinner is relaxed but a bit more dressy, and candlelight and the attentive servers combine to make each evening romantic and effortless.

While Ladera's mountaintop location precludes it from having its own beach, it does have a spectacular pool with bar, terrace, allowing guests to enjoy a pina colada with the awe-inspiring view in front of them and the sounds of the pool's waterfall in the background.

Ladera also has arrangements with two nearby resorts that are located along the water's edge. The Jalousee Hilton sits on



Photos by Scott B. Pruden

The black sand beach at Anse Chastanet, formed from the island's volcanic rock. Anse Piton about a mile below Ladera and offers a pristine strip of (imported) white sand, complete with the amenities of a luxurious beach club. Waiters from the restaurant offer drinks and snacks on the beach, and the restaurant is open to both hotel guests and visitors who want to get out of the sun for a while.

Also available to Ladera guests is the beach at Anse Chastanet, a strip of natural black sand formed from the ocean waves pulverizing the island's volcanic

rock over millions of years.

The resort of the same name also provides dining and bar service on the beach and a sit-down restaurant. And though the black sand makes Anse Chastanet more visually stunning, it's important to bear in mind that the dark color means the sand absorbs more heat, making traversing the stretch between beach chair and water something of an explosive-punctuated sprint.

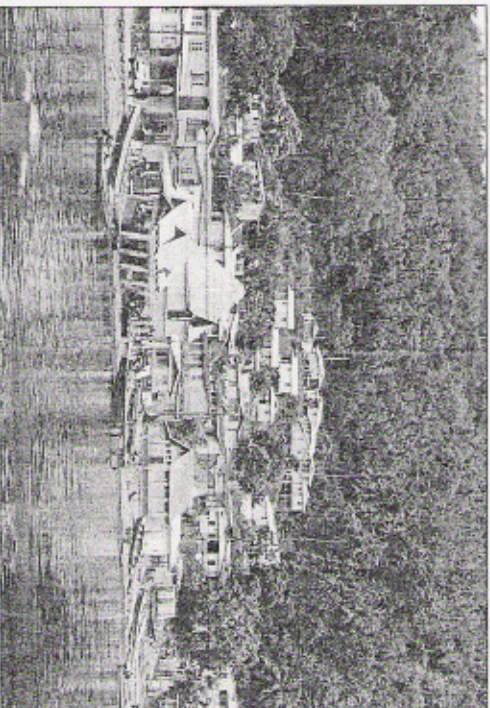
Both beaches have island-wide reputations as excellent snorkeling locations, imparting visitors from the northern cities of Castries and Rodney Bay to enjoy the underwater sights. Anse Chastanet is also known for its scuba diving, with a number of underwater caves available to visit through guided tours and a well-stocked diving rental shop on the beach.

Coming next Sunday: Part two of a St. Lucia island vacation.

If you go

Prices for a night's stay at Ladera during the high season (Dec. 18-April 21) range from \$395 for a one bedroom suite with a plunge pool to \$820 for a luxury villa with a full-sized outdoor pool. Off-season (June 11-Sept. 30) rates range from \$240 for a one-bedroom suite with a plunge pool to \$665 for a luxury villa with a full-sized outdoor pool. Semi-all-inclusive "romance" and wedding packages are also available.

For more information: www.ladera-stlucia.com, or call 708-469-7323. St. Lucia Board of Tourism: www.stlucia.org



Southern hugs the shoreline at St. Lucia. Many homes are built on stilts because of the steep terrain.