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back takes about six hours. If you've got serious cash to burn, book your stay at Jade Mountain, a luxurious hillside resort boasting 24 three-walled sanctuaries that look out on the Pitons—and the ocean beyond—from private 900-square-foot infinity pools.

WHEN IN ROME

If you really want to feel like a local, visit the Friday night fish fry in Anse La Raye, a fishing village that plays host to street vendors selling dinners of entire lobster (just \$30), fried cod, conch, shrimp, breadfruit and the local brew: Piton Beer. Walking up and down the road, artisans display their works—paintings, carvings and jewelry—in hopes of making a few dollars on their creations. A jewelry artist myself, I feel compelled to support everyone's art, and I buy a pair of coconut-shell earrings. Later in the evening, I head to Gros Islet for the Jump Up street party, where St. Lucians grind their hips in a sexy dance called wining, set to the island beat of steel drums. No need to be shy; they're more than happy to show you how to do it if you're curious. While the island is relatively crime-free and you can feel generally safe at most any hour, it's still smart to stick close to your travel companion or a hired guide during the festive affair—like any nightclub anywhere in the world.

GO DEEP

The lush interior of St. Lucia features a 19,000-acre rainforest best toured with a guide. C&M Terrain Roamer Safari Adventure's Lloyd is knowledgeable and possibly one of the funniest guys on the island. He's in training to be a Rastafarian, and with that in mind, he's filled with a contagious passion for appreciating life to the fullest. Soon he's got the entire troupe of tourists singing along with him and the Wailers. With ample amounts of humor to make our journey in the all-terrain jeep a fun-packed day, we're treated to fruit tastings with local farmers, including freshly picked coconut, mango, papaya, passion fruit and breadfruit; pulling cocoa pods right off the tree and cutting them open for a natural sugar rush; a hike to a waterfall (where a few of us brave a dip); spotting diligent land crabs pushing their way through mudslides; a zillion photo ops of villages, tropical orchids and lush vegetation; and an extremely interesting historical glimpse into St. Lucia's history.

As we drive through some of the buildings on the way to the rainforest, Lloyd points out the yellow and black bricks used to build the edifices. Over the course of almost 350 years, St. Lucia was fought over 14 times between the English and the French. The yellow bricks mark the times when the British had won and had begun building

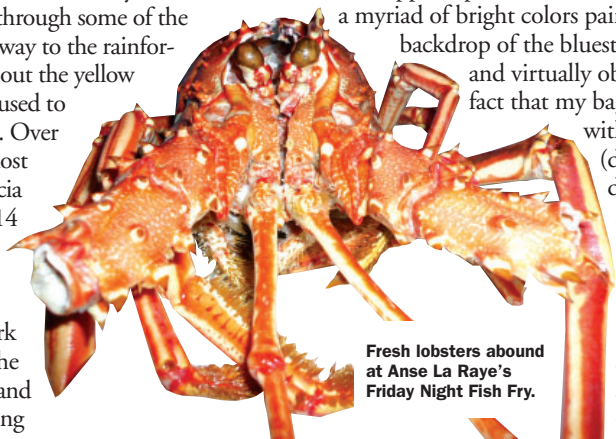
their buildings; the black stones indicate when the French invaded and started building on top of the Brits' work. The British maintained control until 1979, when St. Lucia was granted independence; St. Lucia is now a member of the British Commonwealth under the Parliamentary system. The island's main language is English, so you'll get along quite easily, but the locals do speak to each other in a French-based Creole patois. Other French influences are apparent, too, like the heavy Roman Catholicism of the island residents. The raging territorial battle didn't leave this island embittered, though. Rather, the locals I meet throughout my visit are proud, sweet and happy.

FRESH CATCH

The last night of our stay, we meander through the grounds of the second annual Food & Rum Festival, taking in varieties of rum hailing from all over the Caribbean, and also watching cooking demonstrations. Even Oprah's chef is on hand to dish up some gourmet fare, which inspires an indulgent dinner out at one of St. Lucia's finer restaurants. In Rodney Bay Village, there's a plethora of restaurants and shops. We don nicer resort-wear outfits to head to Ku de ta for dinner. The Thai restaurant would give any hotspot in Atlanta a run for its money in posh décor, inventive menu offerings and world-class culinary presentation. I take a break from the seafood and rum and enjoy a meal of green curry chicken mixed with green eggplant, sweet basil and coconut milk, served with steamed Jasmine rice and a juicy Paul Jaboulet Aîné Côtes du Rhône rosé parallèle. After dinner and walking around Rodney Bay Village for awhile, we retreat to our hotel's restaurant, Ti Banane, where the local entertainment is on stage near the moonlit pool (which curves around to private entrances to a row of swim-up rooms). Soon it's time to head to my comfortable room and pack for the long day of travel ahead of me.

Vacations inherently end too soon. If I'd had more time, I certainly would've made time to "fly" through the rainforest on a zip line, explore the ruins of a sugar cane mill, hike up a Piton, go snorkeling, shop in the artists market in Castries, the capital of St. Lucia, or learn to windsurf. All the more reason for me to return.

Early in the morning, though, I make sure to walk to the sugary shores of Reduit Beach, just a few minutes from Coco Palm, and happen upon the most vivid rainbow: a myriad of bright colors painted against a backdrop of the bluest sky. Relaxed and virtually oblivious to the fact that my bags are all packed with the rest of my (dry) clothes, I dive in the ocean for one last exquisite swim in the Caribbean Sea. The "don't worry, be happy" mantra has taken me over. **SP**



Fresh lobsters abound at Anse La Raye's Friday Night Fish Fry.



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