

HOT AND SPICY; THAT'S GRENADA

BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS

With one-third of its area covered in woodland or rainforest, no trip to Grenada is complete without a trek into the heart of all this greenery. Josephine Matyas

opposite: Conventional beach and watersport activities are largely focused in the south-west region around St. George's, the airport and the coastal strip of Grenada. Grenada Board of Tourism

ONE CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT IS INVOLVED IN PASSING A GRENADIAN DRIVING EXAM.



“**T**his tight corner is called Hit Me Easy, because if you come around the bend and get hit hard, you’ll have a James Bond vehicle-type incident,” says someone who should know: island guide Roger Augustine, whose job involves mastering the twists and turns of this lush, green—and very hilly—Caribbean island.

“Grenada is not large,” he continues. “But if you want to drive around the island you’ll be zigzagging around mountains, just to get from point A to point B along the coastal roads.” The whole time that Augustine is talking, he’s negotiating blind hairpin turns on roads so narrow that it’s a miracle we’re not exchanging paint colours with passing cars.

Going from point A to point B is definitely worth

the effort on Grenada, but you may want to hand the steering wheel over to a local guide: the left-hand drive, manual transmission, steep drop-offs and blind turns could make enjoying the passing scenery a bit of a challenge. And yes, backing up . . . on a hill . . . around a curve is a part of the island’s driving test.

ISLAND LEGACIES

Independent since 1974, but still a part of the Commonwealth, the British and the French fought over Grenada through the intense colonization tug-of-war marking the 1600s and 1700s. The remnants of this age are scattered island-wide, from the stone forts that guard the harbour of St. George’s to the names of

stretch your imagination

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rural villages. “Every village name has a story,” explains Augustine as we drive through *Perd Mon Temps* in the parish of St. David on the south end of the island. “The name is French and it means *waste my time*. When the French saw the rich soil here they expected to dig and find gold and jewels. They dug for a long time, found nothing and decided they had been wasting their time.”

A knack for quirky village names (*Grand Mal* and Happy Hill are some others) was not the only thing that the explorers brought with them. Grenada has always been known as the Isle of Spice—spices being just one of the many crops that were planted in the dark, volcanic soil in the 18th and 19th centuries. Bananas, sugar cane, cocoa, coffee and nutmeg were all brought from afar, cultivated on large plantations and then shipped across the world. The cultivation of spices has risen to importance in more than just name: Grenada can claim more spices per square mile than any other place on the planet.

“Indonesia may be the No. 1 producer of nutmeg quantity,” says Augustine, defending the honour of his home island, “but Grenada is the No. 1 producer of nutmeg quality.” Four centuries ago, nutmeg was the most valuable commodity in the world—its price fuelled by a reputation for everything from a powerful aphrodisiac to a cure for the plague. The fruit is made into jams, jellies and syrups; the lacy red mace layer is dried, ground and used to season dishes; and the hard seed is grated into sauces, baked goods and ice creams.

Spices like nutmeg, mace, cinnamon and bay leaves are still grown and processed the old-fashioned way at the Dougaldston Spice Estate. Just a few kilometres down the roadway, the nutmeg processing factory still hums along in the coastal village of Gouyave. One of two island processing plants, the weathered building is filled with drying racks and sorting bins to move one-third of the world’s nutmeg supply out the door and around the globe.

RIVER ANTOINE PRODUCE 700 BOTTLES OF RUM EACH DAY

POTS OF RUM

Across the island—on the windward side—is another piece of island legacy: the River Antoine Rum Distillery. “This is the oldest working water wheel distillery in the entire Caribbean,” says Augustine as we pull up to the large stone building, where they’ve been crushing cane stalks and stoking the wood-fired boiling pots since 1785. “There are more than 220 years of history at this distillery.” River Antoine produces 700 bottles of rum each day—all of it distilled to a minimum of 75 per cent alcohol volume (when bottled, the fiery liquid is diluted down to 69 per cent for export). As on many Caribbean islands, rum is the beverage of choice.

With a bottle of firewater and a few small bags of fresh spices stowed into my daypack, I know when to call it a day. Time passes quickly on this island ruled by spices and flavours. My only regret? Not enough time to take driving lessons and master that trick of backing up and around those curves. Now that would be living on island time. ■

Known as the “spice isle of the Caribbean,” Grenada is the ideal place to stock up on your supply of fresh spices. Grenada Board of Tourism

TRAVEL PLANNER

Grenada is the most southerly of the Caribbean islands—outside of the normal hurricane zone. (Hurricane Ivan, which swept across the island in 2004, was an exception and the island’s first major hurricane in 50 years.) It is known for spices, the horseshoe-shaped harbour at St. George’s, clear waters, white and black sand beaches and a tropical rainforest. To reach the Grenada Board of Tourism for more information, visit grenadagrenadines.com or call 416-595-1339.

Air Canada and LIAT Airlines fly into Grenada via Barbados or Trinidad. From December through April, Air Canada Vacations operates direct flights from Toronto to Grenada. Visit aircanadavacations.com.

The island is home to many romantic inns and small hotels. The Spice Island Beach Resort (spiceislandbeachresort.com) offers elegant rooms and suites directly on Grand Anse Beach. The 11 cottages at Bel Air Plantation Villa Resort (belairplantation.com) provide more of an intimate hide-away setting about a 30-minute drive from the airport.



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