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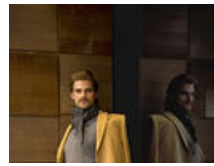
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Travel Caribbean: Unspoiled Dominica is a promised land for hikers

Published 20 minutes ago



Dominica is known as The Nature Island – the island is covered with rainforest-draped mountains. Hiking trails follow the rugged coastline.

JOSEPHINE MATYAS PHOTO

Josephine Matyas

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ROSALIE, DOMINICA—At the beginning of the trail I had my doubts. In front of me was a leafy veil of supersized foliage and twisted vines, hanging like beaded curtains once the rage during the Summer of Love. Wet mud and leaves had turned the path underfoot into a skating rink.

My guide, Derick Joseph, was more certain. “Segment 6,” he said, pushing aside the thick growth. “This is definitely the start of Segment 6.”

On a wet and gusty morning, we were tramping along the Waitukubuli National Trail on [Dominica](#), the Caribbean island celebrated for its natural mindset. The 184-kilometre route runs north-south, divided into 14 segments connecting UNESCO World Heritage sites, the eastern Caribbean’s highest peaks, cascading waterfalls, a sulphurous boiling lake, and paths first cut by the indigenous Kalinago people.

For hikers, Dominica is the Promised Land.

The trails, the terrain, the mountains — every part of Dominica, in fact — is a colossal botanical experiment. In every direction there are rainforest-draped mountains snuggled up against one other. In between, there are fertile valleys and never-ending foliage. The island is untouched by chain properties, casinos or duty-free shops. Leave your souvenir purchases for departure day and you are in for a rude shock: there’s nary a bottle of rum or T-shirt at the pocket-sized airport.

Hiking Segment 6 follows a meandering route through the communal lands of the Kalinago people, along the hilly east coastline of the island and past steep cliffs that plunge to the sea; it’s 3,700 acres of lush forests, peppered with villages of small homes. Formerly known as the Caribs, the Kalinago reclaimed their tribal name to honour their rich heritage and traditions, under threat of extinction.

“During European colonization we put up a resistance, but our numbers became few, so we had to find refuge in the mountainous interior,” explains Derick, whose family roots run deep in the tribal culture. “In 1903 the territory along the east coast was set aside for the Kalinago as community property.”

The drizzle makes progress slow on the slick, red clay pathway. But with a little rain and a little sun, the forest grows at warp speed; some parts of the trail are overgrown and bushwhacking is the only way to stay on track.

At a spot where the trail meanders to a cliff jutting out over the Atlantic, powerful waves crash onto the shore below. As the white foamy waters swirl and then are sucked back into the blue depths, I see the rippled outline of rocks stretching in a ribbon from the coastline into the sea.

“We call this place L’Escalier Tête Chien,” says Derick. “It’s a natural rock staircase rising out of the ocean. According to Kalinago creation legend, the Master boa constrictor had great powers. It came from the sea bed when it was molten lava and left the impressions of its underside to form this staircase.”

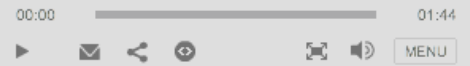
For nature lovers, Dominica is one expansive, green playground. Almost two-thirds of the island is pristine forest, untouched and genuinely unspoiled. It’s a dot in the vast ocean and you won’t find a stretch of straight road. Driving — and walking alongside — the serpentine roadways is a white-knuckle affair. “Small roads, high speeds,” warns Derick as we tramp the last few kilometres out of the forest and along the tortuous roadway.

“This is the old Caribbean,” I am told. “Here things are like they used to be, before mass tourism.”

Later, I get some idea of how the same tree-huggers feel about protecting the ocean. The



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islandwide Dominica Sea Turtle Conservation Organization grew out of a small effort begun a decade ago at the eco-property Rosalie Bay Resort. In the beginning, volunteers protected sea-turtle nesting sites along a stretch of black sand beach in front of the resort cottages. New communities joined the effort and the protection program was expanded.

It's dark outside now. There's no moon and the Pleiades looks like a warm, blue smudge in the sky, but it doesn't shed enough light to help us. Simon George, the turtle expert with NET Rosalie (the resort's Nature Enhancement Team) swings a flashlight back and forth across the volcanic black sand. He's looking for signs of a turtle hatching: tracks made by tiny flippers, or a disturbance on the surface. It doesn't take long to find the slight depression in the sand, a sign that something has been disturbed underground.

"Turtles are ancient creatures," says Simon as he digs out the remains of a nest. "They are reptiles: laying eggs, cold-blooded, breathing air. One of a thousand eggs survives to adulthood. There are many challenges."

By digging out a hatched nest, NET can monitor the numbers of successful eggs, spoiled eggs and — on this occasion — rescue a few stragglers who didn't make it out and to the sea. We pull the tiny creatures from the deep hole in the sand and set them on the beach. But that's all the head start Simon will allow.

"It's important for the hatchling to crawl down the beach and to the water. That is part of the imprinting process."

He flicks off the lone flashlight and we leave the tiny turtles to find their way, as nature intended. The only sound left is the sound of the waves, calling the turtles to their ocean home.

Josephine Matyas is a Kingston, Ont.-based freelance writer whose trip was subsidized by Discover Dominica and Rosalie Bay Resort. She can be found online at www.writerwithoutborders.com

JUST THE FACTS

ARRIVING Getting to Dominica requires extra effort (there are no direct long-haul flights). American Airlines and LIAT connect to the island from Puerto Rico. Connections with regional carriers are available from neighbouring islands, including Antigua, Barbados, St. Maarten and St. Lucia.

DOING The nature, hiking and water opportunities on Dominica could easily fill several weeks. Waitukubuli National Trail is divided into 14 segments of varying length and difficulty. Hire a certified hiking guide — in many spots the growth is thick and it is easy to lose the trail. Scenes from *Pirates of the Caribbean 2* and *3* were filmed in Dominica's rainforests. Boiling Lake is the world's second largest volcanically heated lake. Kalinago Baran Auté — meaning "village by the sea" — models a typical pre-Columbus Kalinago village. Champagne Reef is a popular snorkelling site, named for the bubbles that rise from the ocean floor. The waters of Emerald Pool reflect the green colour of the rainforest. On a hot day, there are waterfall pools to swim in; try Emerald Pool or Trafalgar Falls. Cabrits National Park is a protected site that encompasses it all: forest, swamplands, beach and the well-preserved, historic remains of an English garrison.

SLEEPING Rosalie Bay Resort is dedicated to eco-wellness and sustainability, and to supporting the local community. There are spacious cottages and a nature-inspired spa fronting a stunning black-sand beach lined by palm trees. While the water is too rough for swimming, it is perfect for long walks and turtle watching (the resort does have an onyx-lined saltwater pool). rosaliebay.com

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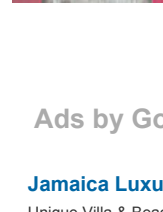
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