

St. Lucia's signature sight: the Piton Mountains



welcome to St. Luscious

St. Lucia is a Caribbean chocolate colossus

BY RAYNA KATZ
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I've had a massage or two in my day, but never one where I wanted to eat the lotion being slathered on me.

The thought likely came to me because this particular treatment was done with chocolate mint oil.

The scene of this confectionary contact high was Sugar Beach, a Viceroy Resort, one of several hotels on St. Lucia that takes advantage of this Caribbean island's rich chocolate connection.

While chocolate may be more closely associated with destinations like Switzerland or Hershey, Pa., St. Lucia actually has been home to acres of cacao trees since at least the 1700s.

My trip started in the town of Soufriere, home to the Piton Mountains, two volcanic formations (Gros Piton and Petit Piton) — and a UNESCO World Heritage site — that sprout more than 2,000 feet into the sky. Some hotels allow visitors to climb these majestic points, but only with a guide.

The first stop was Boucan by Hotel Chocolat (thehotelchocolat.com), a charming 14-room hotel with spectacular food and, of course, an immersion in chocolate.

Known officially as the Rabot Estate, the land that hosts Boucan was established as a chocolate estate in 1785. The place is covered with cacao trees, the plant from which chocolate is harvested. Hotel Chocolat — a London-based chocolate maker — bought the resort in 2006.

On day one of my stay at the hotel, I gained a new appreciation for the sweet treat during the Tree to Bar Tour, which leads guests through the estate groves. Along the way, visitors select ripe cocoa pods to create their own chocolate bar. Midway through

the tour, you'll graft a tree and put a name tag on it. If you come back in 18 months, you'll find your spruce all grown up. Don't worry if you lack a green thumb, the staff will help you.

The second half of the tour, when you make a chocolate bar, is an optional starting point for those who'd rather stay indoors or who prefer a shorter lesson. The chef makes the experience fun and sends guests off with a tasty parting gift.

You don't have to be a guest of the hotel for the tour. Be sure to stay for a meal on-site, though, and order the chocolate tasting plate, a nine-stage feast that includes roasted whole cacao beans and a chilled shot of liquid chocolate. Also of note is the hotel's spa, where all treatments incorporate chocolate.

If you return home and crave Hotel Chocolat product, your fix will be available soon: The company plans to open a store/restaurant in Tribeca in June. And if you'll need a regular dose, Hotel Chocolat has a monthly club. Register at chocs.co.uk.

At Sugar Beach (viceroyhotels-andresorts.com), home of that Willy Wonka-worthy massage, there's a chocolate body scrub at the Rainforest Spa, which is spread across a series of tree houses. The hotel recently underwent a renovation, which, among other upgrades, included the

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Chocolate treats at the Cap Maison Resort & Spa



MIKAEL LAMBER



Chocolate spa treatment at Boucan by Hotel Chocolat (also at right). Yes, chocolate lotion is used in the massage.

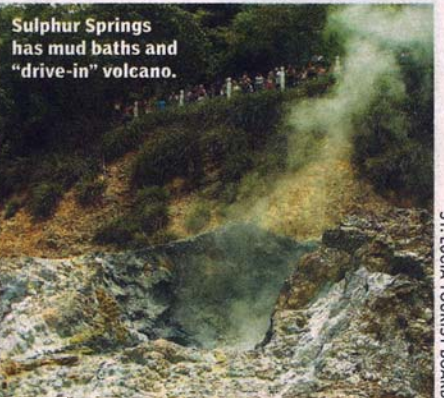


BOUCAN BY HOTEL CHOCOLAT

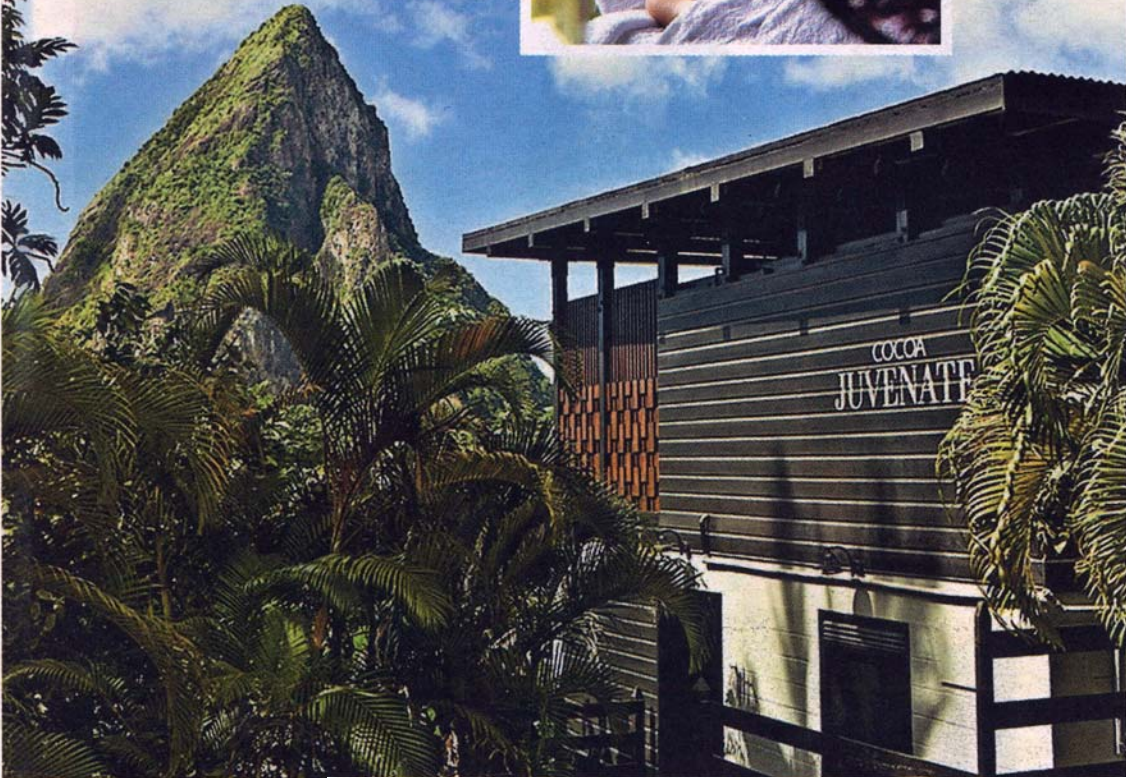
IF YOU GO

- ◆ JetBlue offers nonstop service to St. Lucia; one flight daily.
- ◆ St. Lucia features many hotels with varied price levels, including Sugar Beach, \$350; Boucan by Hotel Chocolat, \$400; Calabash Cove, \$465, and Jade Mountain, \$1,200. Several also offer all-inclusive packages.

Sulphur Springs has mud baths and "drive-in" volcano.



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PHOTOS BY BOUCAN BY HOTEL CHOCOLAT

addition of outdoor cabanas where couples can enjoy a private dinner.

Another hotel, Jade Mountain (jade-mountain.com), serves savory dishes featuring chocolate. But it's the rooms, each of which are unique, that dazzle. There are 27 rooms – or "sanctuaries," as the staff calls them – and 24 have pools in them. This is no wading pool, either; it's a big dipper, surrounded by an expansive and luxurious guest room.

The hotel's rooftop bar offers a 360-degree view of St. Lucia and the only lookout to both Pitons.

There are activities beyond gorging on chocolate. Two highlights are in Soufriere.

The tranquil St. Lucia Rainforest

spans 1,250 acres and has options for viewing that come with a side of relaxation, or a dose of adventure. There's an aerial tram, several zip line options, a bird-watching tour and nature hikes.

Sulphur Springs Park is the site of supposedly restorative mud baths and what's billed as the world's only drive-in volcano; so named because you can motor right up to it. Though it's no oozing Mount St. Helens, it's an active site complete with ominous steam rising. You can explore alone or with a guide, and indulge in a bath.

And when you return to your hotel room, you'll have a newfound appreciation for that chocolate mint on your pillow.



Diamond Falls provides a calming, secluded retreat.

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