

Cruise with a purpose: Focus on your interest by using local guides

During a Caribbean cruise, self-styled shore excursions with local guides offer lessons in red, white and cerulean blue.

By **Stephen Nash** Special to the Star Tribune | JUNE 30, 2017 — 1:23PM

Here's some July 4th inspiration for you, fellow traveler: Patriotism is portable. You can seek out American roots, in all their deeply tangled, knotty glory, in the unlikeliest of palmy destinations.

My companions on a recent voyage of exploration — no matter our divergent politics — agreed that patriotism is more than flag-waving and fireworks. It's coming to terms with where our history has taken us, and gaining appreciation for the consequences.

That's how we wound up, as some Americans of an earlier epoch might have, at a nothing-much, half-hidden little beach on the island of Dominica. Their plan, never realized, was epic: a strike force, a clandestine landing, some likely slaughter. Then a coup d'état, to turn the island into a republic of gunrunners, drug smugglers and neo-Nazis.

Welcome to an early chapter in our quest to convert a humdrum Caribbean cruise into something more engaging. We three couples enjoyed a big, relatively cheap cruise ship as a conveyance. But we wanted to flee the glitzathon — bad-art auctions, in-your-face jewelry, duty-free liquor sales — and the often superficial shore excursions. So we customized, finding local guides (it's not hard) and tailoring the cruise to suit our curiosities.

Along the way, we broke out of the tourist cloud and saw our destinations for something closer to what they really are. We also benefited local people more directly and, surprisingly often, we saved money. Our island guides told us that when you book excursions through the cruise lines, they scoop up as much as 40 percent of the money on the table. I tried several times to contact representatives of the Royal Caribbean, Carnival and Norwegian lines to try to verify this figure. None replied. These three conglomerates float more than 80 percent of global cruise passengers.

Travelers could choose almost any theme, from native cuisine to tropical birds, but we decided to make our trip an exploration of the connections between Caribbean and U.S. history. Who knew, for example, that a youthful sojourn in Barbados helped George Washington win the American Revolution? That 2017 marks an even century since the U.S. purchase of St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas from Denmark? And who knew that this pocket beach on the western edge of Dominica, shrouded by sea grapes and visited only by brown pelicans, was the proposed destination for a nasty paramilitary coup in 1981 — “Operation Red Dog” — that never quite materialized?

Our guide to the site was Lennox Honychurch, author of several books about Dominican history. He was press secretary for the prime minister of the island back then, when local renegades made an unlikely alliance with some violent Rastafarians — “the Dreads” — and a seagoing North American racist cabal.

“They never made it here,” he explained. They packed up their dynamite, an arsenal, and some Nazi and Confederate flags for the trip, but “the captain of the boat they hired to bring them over went and told the FBI instead. So they were all arrested when they got to the dock in New Orleans, and their mercenary adventure was cut off.” (Now that's patriotism, Captain.)

It's an easy bet that few if any other tourists stop here, unless they have a flat tire. There's no stone marker, no commemorative sign. I had the faintly supercilious feeling that we were among the few custodians of the history of the place, and I liked that.

Some connections are in the details. At a splendid national museum up the road, devoid of all tourists, we saw an ancient U.S.-made Washington hand-press, the workhorse for Dominica's first newspaper.



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JOHN BURCHAM, NEW YORK TIMES

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the United States buying the Virgin Islands St. John, top, St. Croix and St. Thomas. from



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_149877710)
LINDA NASH, SPECIAL TO THE STAR TRIBUNE

Washington House in Bridgetown, Barbados, is where a 19-year-old George Washington lived.

Honychurch has also served as the island's culture minister, and we had him to ourselves for the day. All it took to enlist his services was a few e-mail inquiries to the island's tourism bureau and other local contacts.

Such personal experiences often cost no more than a big-group, cruise-line-organized excursion, and sometimes less. For \$84 each, we could have been part of a crowd on a three-hour trip to a waterfall, a typical cruise-booked excursion. Instead, for the same price, we had enjoyed six hours of deep immersion, expertly guided, to tourist-free destinations, on a private tour.

Virgin Islands as safeguards

For typical visits to the Caribbean, preparations are limited to picking which deck of the ship to bunk on, which dinner seating to choose, which drink package to favor. But each of us read a book for background about one or another of our island destinations — Honychurch's "The Dominica Story," for example, or maybe some ancient news clippings, dug up online, about the history we'd be immersed in.

That's how we discovered that 2017 is the centenary of the U.S. purchase of St. Croix and the other U.S. Virgin Islands from Denmark for \$25 million. (No mention of this in the cruise-ship bulletins, where you could learn instead about getting a seaweed massage, or how to join a "Rolex competition.")

The U.S. bought the Virgins because we were worried that Denmark might be overrun by the Germans during World War I, creating an enemy outpost in our own backyard. The war soon ended, and the islands have been, sadly, in and out of economic distress since then.

Shortly after their acquisition, the Virgins were looked on, in some quarters, as not much of a bargain. U.S. Treasury outlays were required to keep the island economies afloat. "Is it not possible that we purchased a lemon grove?" one congressman quipped back then. "Perhaps a squeezed lemon," his colleague added.

By now, at least some of this low esteem is mutual, as it happens. "We'd have been better off with the Danes," was the genial conclusion of our St. Croix guide, Ras Lumumba Corriette, as he shook his gray dreadlocks in mock dismay.

We arranged the services of Ras Lumumba through a nonprofit called Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism. He dispensed philosophical quotations from Einstein, Spinoza and Robert Oppenheimer, along with strands of island history and culture, as we hiked a trail to an abandoned lighthouse and then exalted seaviews along the heights of Maroon Ridge. The Maroons were slaves who escaped from Danish plantations to hide out among these rugged cliffs until they could transit to sanctuary in Puerto Rico.

We foraged nuts and herbs from a savory catalog of local plant life along the way. Ras Lumumba recited, with syncopated precision, their Latin names, including *Terminalia catappa*, or ajuna nuts, and *Abrus precatorius*, the pungent licorice of "jequirity," or "jumbie bead."

That night over dinner it was safe to guess that ours was the only table aboard the ship where the legacies of slavery and the question of what might be done for the economy of St. Croix, our American territorial ward, were discussed.

Washington in Barbados

In preparation for the next port of call, our friends Jim and Laura poured us a glass of wine and told us what they'd gleaned from their readings on the surprising cultural kinship of Barbados and Charleston, S.C. It extends from language and cuisine to the scourge of slavery.

And our guide there, Victor Cook, walked us through that history the following day along the streets of the capital, Bridgetown. By the mid-1600s, English arrivistes had perfected slave-based sugar plantation economics, and the island was said to be the richest jewel in England's crown of colonies. But planters were being squeezed by a burgeoning population and the consolidation of landholdings.

Many emigrated to the Carolinas, and founded Charleston in 1670, bringing along the cruelties of their slaveholding culture, along with still-surviving remnants of architectural styles and dialects. An estimated 7 million Americans, black and white, can

claim Barbadian lineage. “The first seven governors of the Carolina colony were Barbadians,” as Victor Cook pointed out. “That’s why it is said that Charleston was the foster child of Barbados.”

Nineteen-year-old George Washington slept here in Bridgetown. And, Barbadians like to say, he woke up here, too. His older half-brother, Lawrence, had tuberculosis, and his doctor recommended the Caribbean climate. George spent seven weeks here with him in 1751. It was, a biographer says, the only visit he ever made outside the U.S.

The house where he stayed has only in recent years been identified and restored, with the help of archaeologists and other specialists from the U.S.

We learned there that Washington was first introduced to military tactics and artillery at the nearby James Fort. Perhaps just as important, he contracted smallpox. He did not succumb, but instead developed an immunity that saved him, a quarter-century later, when many of his Revolutionary troops died of the disease. What if we’d lost Washington to smallpox during that war?

Our Grenada invasion

Grenada, our final landfall, is perhaps best known to U.S. history as the target of our full-scale invasion in 1983, a deeply controversial decision taken by the Reagan administration ostensibly to protect American medical students and to fend off a violent Marxist coup. Grenada had also been drawing very close to Fidel Castro’s Cuba.

Grenada had been a British crown colony, and even the redoubtable warrior Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, a Reagan confidante, thought the U.S. invasion a badly mistaken adventure to rectify “an internal matter.” That opinion — that the U.S. should not have intervened in the destiny of another sovereign nation — was widely shared among both our enemies and allies.

But the invasion was not unpopular in the U.S., and had the firm support of both Dominica and Barbados, anxious for the stability and safety of their own democracies if the violent overthrow of an elected government had succeeded on Grenada.

We arranged for the candid guide Mandoo Seales to show us sites connected with the 11-day invasion, which he himself had lived through, losing close civilian friends in the mayhem. He also escorts U.S. veterans of the invasion who return for a visit.

Seales’ comments on the current status of Grenada showed both affectionate patriotism for his own nation, and deep concern. For lack of employment, talented Grenadans are emigrating, for example. More than 30,000 people who were born in Grenada now live in the U.S. Our new citizens are our firmest link of all.

As for the national leadership, Seales remarked, “One politician in the river, that’s pollution. All politicians in the river, that’s a solution.” We discussed those vexations over a long lunch of grilled mahi, coconut shrimp, conch curry and rum punch on the beach outside Saint George’s, the capital.

It was a lesson we’d learned at every stop: Local guides know local food best, and a smaller group of visitors opens up far more possibilities.

And, of course, we weighed the wisdom of the invasion. At the time, President Reagan billed it as an antidote to Vietnam-era angst over U.S. military prowess. “Our days of weakness are over. Our military forces are back on their feet and standing tall,” he, you might say, reasoned. But U.S. intelligence was so bad that our military was reduced at times to using tourist maps. At one point, Seales told us, a U.S. officer was trying to reach the Pentagon on a streetside pay phone, using a credit card.

Despite our attempts to draw him out, our host declined to take sides on whether the invasion had been a good idea — a debate we naturally continued later. His outlook was that the situation would have been tragic, either way. On the road back to the ship, we stopped at a memorial for U.S. military men. Nineteen perished.

Our friend Cicely summed up, on our last evening. Grenada, she said, is beautiful and engaging. And also, behind the airbrushed presentations offered most visitors, it is a place of pathos.

Do we travel to explore the human condition, or to escape it? A false dilemma, I’d say. We can do some of both, if we set out to. Our preparations for that kind of journey weren’t burdensome, and they lifted our days, during this too-short cruise, well out of

the predictable. There was still time, be it said, for a contrapuntal round of cruise-ship bingo, trivia contests, or that seaweed massage — but they were no longer mandatory.

Stephen Nash's book "Grand Canyon for Sale" will be published this fall (grandcanyonforsale.com).
