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Travel
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BROWN CANNON III

ANDROS

Four national parks flourish in the Bahamas' secret garden

BY RICHARD MORIN
Special to The Washington Post

The ankle-twisting trail to the magnificent Rainbow Blue Hole zigzagged around limestone outcrops and past wild orchids, bromeliads and wild coffee plants, and sea grape, mahogany and brasiletto trees. Little did we know that we were stumbling through nature's medicine cabinet.

"This is a pigeon plum tree," a natural laxative, said our guide, Torran Simms, pausing by a bushy tree with emerald-green leaves. For those with the opposite problem, a tea made from the rough bark of the stopper tree will "stop you right up."

Every few paces on the mile-long route on Andros Island promised a cure for whatever ails you. Golden creeper for a sore throat. Crab bush for stomach distress. When boiled, the shaggy red bark of the gumbo limbo tree yields a healing topical ointment. It's also a key ingredient in a legendary herbal tea called "21-Gun Salute," bush medicine's answer to Viagra.

It was the morning of the first day of my three-day mission in early September to visit four national parks on Andros, thought to be the largest and least explored inhabited island of the Bahamas archipelago.

Over the course of my whirlwind stay I would snorkel on the world's third-longest fringing coral reef, tour what may be the only national park on the planet dedicated to a crab, get caught in a sea turtle traffic jam on Andros's vast but rarely visited West Side, and leap off a 15-foot cliff into the watery home of the mythical Lusca, the half-shark, half-squid said to inhabit the island's so-called blue holes.

ANDROS CONTINUED ON F6

ST. MARTIN

A romantic beach getaway — with the kids

BY JOHN BRILEY
Special to The Washington Post

"I am *never* going on vacation with you guys again," my sister Rachel says.

A curious sentiment, given the setting: We are at a beachfront restaurant on the island of St. Martin, 11:30 a.m. on a mid-December Monday, sharing a mojito while awaiting plates of sauteed grouper. My wife, Cathleen, and children, Kai (6) and Christina (3), are with us. Twenty feet away the Caribbean Sea laps at buttery sands.

Rachel joined our family vacation in large part to help with the kids and allow Cathleen and me glimpses of what vacationing was before we had children. Lost in this arrangement was how hard it would be for us — or, more precisely, me — to actually let that happen. Tangled in the bramble of parenting, I struggle to shake free and appreciate what started it all: the marriage.

Thus on Day Two of a week-long trip three adults are tripping over each other, issuing conflicting edicts to the children and sniping comments to each other as we drift ever further

ST. MARTIN CONTINUED ON F4

JOHN BRILEY

BELIZE

On a farm, surrounded by jungle, but not exactly roughing it

BY CHRIS SANTELLA
Special to The Washington Post

With no nearby relatives, my wife, Deidre, and I don't get many opportunities for romantic getaways sans daughters. So when my mother-in-law volunteered to babysit for a long weekend in May so we could celebrate our anniversary, we jumped at the chance. Deidre wanted someplace warm. I wanted to do a little fly-fishing. She didn't want to be stuck sitting on the beach all day while I fished.

After a consultation with Jim Klug at Yellow Dog Flyfishing Adventures (a travel agency that books many anglers into Belize), we arrived at what seemed like a perfect compromise — Belcampo Belize Lodge.

It turns out it was no compromise at all.

Belcampo sits on a hilltop five miles inland from the fishing village of Punta Gorda in southern Belize, not far from the Guatemalan border. The resort — which includes a main lodge and 16 suites set along the hillside — is in the midst of a vast rainforest, home to a host of animals, including howler monkeys, tapirs, jaguars and more than 250 bird species, such as the keel-billed toucan, slaty-tailed trogon and

BELIZE CONTINUED ON F6

Top, the nature reserve-rain forest surrounding Belcampo Belize Lodge, outside the fishing village of Punta Gorda. The lodge adds a luxe aspect to "agritourism."

DOMINICA

Beauty draws you in, but stay to find the depth

BY STEPHEN NASH
Special to The Washington Post

Most travelers hit on Dominica — or Waitukubuli, in the island's native Kalinago language — during a half-day shore excursion on a cruise.

Of course, cruising's the equivalent of speed-dating the Caribbean islands. They're gorgeous or handsome by turns, these palmy ports of call, but they can begin to seem alike to visitors who don't have time to become more intimately involved. In a longer visit, even a few days, the distinctively natural character of Dominica (doe-min-EE-ka) — halfway between Guadeloupe and Martinique, and smaller than either — emerges.

It's defined partly by what the island is not. (It is not the Dominican Republic, for starters.) It's easy to get to, but the airport is not large enough for a commercial jet. There's no wall of Westin, Hilton, Ritz-Carlton; no Hyatt, no high-rise hotels on these shores at all. No golf courses, even! The lack of homogenizing resortification is because of Dominica's coastline, which is nearly all big round rocks or sheer cliffs — very few sand beaches.

DOMINICA CONTINUED ON F8

LINDA NELSON NASH

THE CARIBBEAN ISSUE

DOMINICA FOR DEVELOPMENT-DETOX

The archipelago's 'Nature Island' provides a chance to interact with relatively uncrowded, unspoiled terrain

DOMINICA FROM **F1**

All to the good, my wife, Linda, and I found — because Dominica's self-description as "the Nature Island" turns out to be more than just an advertising slogan. A quarter of its exquisite landscapes are protected as national parks. Thoroughly, and in some cases tragically, banged up by Tropical Storm Erika in August, most of Dominica's best lodging and destinations have reopened, or will soon.

Visitors come here for small-scale resorts in quiet floral settings, and plantain chips served en plein air with grilled fresh mahi on a banana leaf. Some might even come because they've heard this billed as one of the world's 10 best ethical travel destinations, an annual list compiled by the nonprofit group Ethical Traveler.

Even more, they come for better odds of engagement with the place itself, instead of pool decks and passivity.

Many of those kinds of opportunities are found in the volcanic interior, whose steep ridges and ravines lie under a nearly uninterrupted blanket of rich, dense rain forest. Along more than 300 rivers you can visit a series of cascades and grottoes. There are challenging treks, like the 115-mile Waitukubuli National Trail, which spans the island's north-south axis. Alternatively, many easier and shorter hikes lead to dramatic waterfalls, too.

The island's already small population of about 60,000 is shrinking as the market for its agricultural exports declines and Dominicans emigrate to find work. So tourism is an economic lifeline. Visitors are rarely taken for granted.

Despite the comparative lack of high-gloss development, living standards here seem better than on other, more impoverished or socially stratified islands. The dispiriting signals of poverty so common along the roads of other islands — panhandlers, junk cars, stray dogs and the smell of burning plastic, for example — are not pervasive here, but there's little evidence of great wealth, either. "We don't really have an upper class," one of our guides told us. "We have poorer people, and then the 'affordables' — those who can afford things."

We arrived after a twisty 50-minute trip from the airport at the Rosalie Bay Resort, capacity 50 guests, which we'd chosen partly for its "eco-friendly" aspirations. This is an arena in which the competition everywhere, even on Dominica, is intensifying, and there are other eco-lodges to consider. Rosalie Bay's power supply is solar panels and an elegant white Danish wind turbine, poised and twirling like a prima donna on a nearby hill.

The resort's secluded, forest-fringed black-sand beach is a nesting area for three kinds of sea turtles, all endangered, and during the right season, you can be awakened after midnight to be guided out to watch them lay their eggs. The owner is an American expat, Beverly Deikel, who campaigned for legal protection for the turtles on Dominica. They are now something of an icon; so is she.

The most celebrated of the charismatic endangered species on this island is portrayed on the national flag: the darkly imperious Sisserou parrot, found nowhere else on the planet. A precarious 300 of them are thought to persist in the wet, dense, remote uplands. On our first full day, we went looking for them.

Not unaided, though. Not in a left-lane, stick-shift nation whose corkscrewing, pot-holed roads invite poor choices. Anyway, we are sub-amateur birders, although we do know which end of the binoculars to peer through. We asked for a guide.

And — perhaps because Dominica is not overrun with visitors — our guide happened to be Bertrand Jno Baptiste. We soon learned that he is "Dr. Birdy," a lifelong conservationist and a co-author of "Dominica's Birds." He had a spotting scope the size of a bazooka and trained it on distant prey with unerring skill.

During introductions, I joked lamely that I hoped to take at least three parrots home with me. "Yes," he said, "and if you try, I can guarantee that you will spend a lot longer on this island than you had planned for."

In short order, we took in the Antillean crested hummingbird, the trembler, the magnolia cuckoo, the ubiquitous bananaquit and many other colorful avians. We watched the raucous Jaco parrot, which bears a spectrum of loud colors, at very close quarters as it eviscerated an orange.

We even heard — but never saw — the elusive Sisserou parrot, whose sonorous call had us scanning the tree line from under the shelter of a banana leaf during a long downpour.

Bertrand was also a sharply candid guide to the history, culture and politics of Dominica as we maneuvered to 18th-century Fort Shirley and then to a rowboat expedition up the tidal Indian River. We figured it was blind good luck that we had Dr. Birdy for the day.

That conclusion shifted later on: It wasn't luck, it was a pattern. Our next outing was a half-day hike along Segment Five of the Waitukubuli National Trail, the equivalent of the Appalachian or the Pacific Crest trail in the United States.

Our guide could have been any competent person, but turned out to be Prosper Paris.

Paris is a Kalinago — a member of the indigineous people, formerly known as Caribs, who have lived on Dominica and other Caribbean islands since around 3000 B.C. — whose cultural expertise qualified him to help with the installation of an exhibit featuring the tribe in the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. He has consulted on archaeological digs in the Caribbean and is the founder and leader of a longtime cultural dance troupe. With his wife, he is the co-author of a Kalinago cookbook.

The Waitukubuli Trail is a magnificent achievement for a small nation, testimony to its commitment to maintain its biological diversity. Defending the trail will be a struggle as time passes: On one leg of our hike — a narrow remnant track from colonial times, paved with stones — we emerged abruptly from the rain forest onto a broad dirt road freshly blasted into the side of a hill along the route where the National Trail used to be. Hmmm.

This gave way where the skinny, slippery, side-slanted trail resumed. But it was now hemmed in on the downhill side for perhaps half a mile by five ugly and quite hazardous strands of new barbed wire, installed by an industrious and heedless coffee and cacao farmer.

Our visit was during the dry season, which allegedly extends from February through August, but rain threatened. We didn't want that. Thick mats of roots, the sinews of the rain forest canopy, extended out over the trail from massive ficus, gommier and cabbage palm trees. Ice-slick rocks made fords and descents cautious work.

Rain forests such as this one were the domain of the "mawons" — Africans who rebelled and escaped from French sugar plantations on which they were enslaved in the 1700s, and learned to survive and hide, raid and fight. They were also the realm of the Kalinago, who were decimated by disease, slavery and warfare during the European influx that followed Columbus. The last Kalinago remnants combined on Dominica, and fought on until 1903, when they were granted a reservation by the British government — the nucleus of what is now the Kalinago Territory.

Paris is a repository of the history and folklore of his people, which we learned much more of along the trail. When I tried to imitate the spooky song of birds we were hearing, called mountain whistlers, he warned me of my ignorant mistake. "Don't imitate the mountain whistler," he cautioned, as the wind picked up and the sun disappeared. "You'll make it rain really hard."

He executed a few wiggle-dance steps to counteract my error, probably in jest, and the rain never came.

We paused to rest at a cabbage palm, whose bunched roots are a vivid scarlet. When the Kalinago were in hiding, Paris told us, they ate the palm fruit at the top of the tree and used those roots as harnesses and straps. They bashed the bark with stones to release sap, and that attracted beetles whose larvae were edible. We ended the day with a visit to the tribe's cultural center and model village.

The Kalinago reserve and our resort are on the windblown Atlantic side of Dominica, and the crashing surf was a welcome 24-hour soundtrack at our cottage. The eastern side faces the far calmer Caribbean, where the ebb and flow of cruise ship day-trippers and their buses can crowd some destinations. Ask your guide to choreograph your day to avoid the swarm, and you will often have places like the easily accessible Emerald Pool, with its grotto and tranquil waterfall, all to yourself.

Scotts Head was one of the final day trips near the end of our week on Dominica: a picturesque high promontory at the southern end of the island. A 10-minute climb on an easy path leads up to a serene panorama.

Turn, and there's the long curve of Soufriere Bay, its scatter of palms and fishing boats, and the line of coast that leads north, eventually to Fort Shirley. Look seaward and you can almost make out the line where the Atlantic and Caribbean meet.

And this is also where the Waitukubuli National Trail begins. We could see it climb over a ridge toward the central highlands, past many of the places we'd visited and toward the dense, green central highlands, where, somewhere, a Sisserou parrot was waiting to be found.

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If you go

WHERE TO STAY

Rosalie Bay Resort
Rosalie, Dominica
800-831-9249
www.rosaliebay.com
Low-rise "eco-boutique" resort where the Rosalie River meets the Atlantic. Includes 28 spacious rooms, with fine meals and well-planned daily activities around the island. During high season (March to mid-September), rooms start at $188 for a garden view or $299 for an oceanfront view.

Secret Bay
Ross Blvd., Portsmouth, Dominica
767-445-4444
www.secretbay.dm
Six ecofriendly villas and bungalows tucked into a palm forest overlooking a cliff on the ocean, with beaches. Rooms run $450-$1,300 a night, depending on the season and room size.

WHERE TO EAT

Islet View Restaurant and Bar
Castle Bruce, Dominica
767-446-0370
An inexpensive, open-air restaurant that serves super fresh fish and chicken, banana bread, plantain chips and local beer.

Diane's "Free D" Place
Scotts Head, Dominica
Fifty feet from the beach where small, colorful open fishing boats are launched. Eat outside and watch the street life of this small community unfold, then stroll out to the half-hour climb at Scotts Head, where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Caribbean.

WHAT TO DO

Waitukubuli National Trail
767-266-3593
www.waitukubulitrail.com
The 115-mile trek runs along farms, coastlines, waterfalls and steep forest.

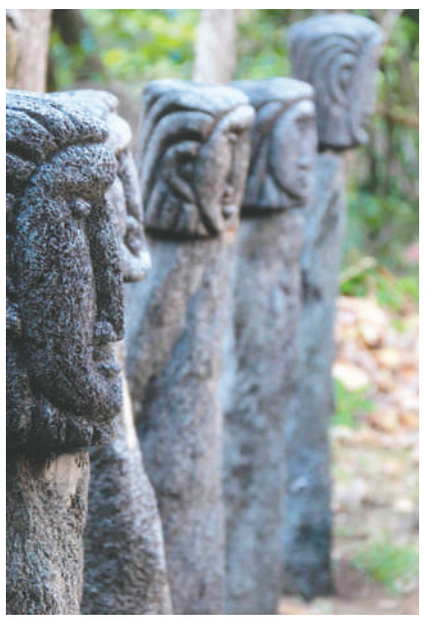
Kalinago Barana Aute
767-445-7979
www.kalinagobaranaaute.com
A reconstructed settlement by the island's indigenous Caribs, who have their own autonomous region within Dominica. The cultural center offers historical tours, musical performances and native foods in an exquisite coastal setting. A site pass and tour start at $10.

Cabrits National Park
http://bit.ly/1hEkWsN
The protected site overlooks the Caribbean and features a restored garrison from the 18th century. The park also includes rain forest and wetland habitats, and coral reefs.

INFORMATION
www.dominica.dm

— *S.N.*

PHOTOS BY LINDA NELSON NASH



Clockwise from top: The view from the summit of Scotts Head, looking upon its namesake village; in Dominica's volcanic rain forests, hundreds of streams gather and create waterfalls; ceremonial face carvings at a Kalinago village museum.