

Love in Saint Lucia

Sensual island is perfect for secluded getaways

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JANUARY 5, 2013



Cap Maison is a luxury resort of villas overlooking the Caribbean Sea in Saint Lucia.

Photograph by: Rochelle Lash

The boutique resorts of the luscious island of Saint Lucia are taking the game of love to a new level.

If romance is in your sights (and Valentine's Day is soon), Saint Lucia is home to several standout destination hotels along its picturesque western Caribbean coast: In the south, high atop the town of Soufrière, the eco-chic resort Ladera is an enchanting getaway where two former Montrealers are making changes, including thrilling new accommodations and gastronomic adventures. And at the luxurious Cap Maison outside of upmarket Rodney Bay in the north, lovers can spend amorous nights aboard a private yacht and carefree days swimming and diving in the sea, while families can enjoy togetherness in posh suites and private villas. Both hotels invited me to visit and experience their Caribbean way of life.

These intimate Saint Lucian hotels have fashioned romantic experiences that play on the island's sensuality — the scorching sun, the surging ocean, the rhythmic Calypso-style music and the generally carefree vibe of barely there clothes and sultry temperatures that range from 26 to 30 degrees. Given Saint Lucia's French-English heritage, you'll be saying "Je t'aime" before you have finished your first rum punch.

"Saint Lucia is all about l'amour," said Olivier Bottois, an executive at Ladera and a former Montrealer whose prestigious background includes the Four Seasons hotels, the illustrious Hôtel Le Saint-James in Old Montreal and a distinctive Relais & Châteaux in New York's Adirondacks.

"The island offers tranquillity, the freedom to enjoy the sea and sun and precious privacy at intimate resorts that you don't find everywhere," Bottois said.

I would call Ladera and Cap Maison the "un-resorts." They are personal, secluded getaways devoid of the brouhaha of larger hotels. Lots of personal attention. No crowded pools, blaring music or

lineups for buffets. Sometimes, no kids, either. Ladera welcomes guests age 15 and older, so if unfettered romance is your goal, it's a treat being free of the commotion of youngsters.

Ladera is a unique jewel nestled on the edge of the rainforest overlooking the Caribbean with a singular view of Saint Lucia's distinctive two peaks, the Piton Mountains, a protected UNESCO World Heritage site. Unpretentious and built around nature, Ladera is a living work of art, an eco-enterprise with its own artisans who handcraft the furniture for the 32 suites and a platoon of gardeners who tend the resort's luxuriant tropical botanical gardens.

Ladera is distinctive for its authentic island architecture, folkloric decor and unusual three-walled suites, meant to have guests experience nature in a splendid climate. A hummingbird will alight on the edge of your private terrace. And you can watch for a fleeting glimpse of a parrot through the mango and almond trees. But don't expect air-conditioning. Ladera is a place to unplug, forget your electronic gadgets and your cares. With one wall open to the sea and sky, luxury here means gentle breezes cooling your room and non-stop views of the sun setting on a sparkling bay. Each suite has its own private plunge pool for private skinny-dipping, so guests are always outdoors, continually soothed by the sound of the waves and spellbound by the Pitons.

For Ladera's 20th anniversary in 2012, master hotelier Bottois improved on nature's perfection. The newest accommodations — opening Feb. 1 — are hilltop dream suites and a villa, spacious hideaways with Ladera's signature pools and traditional Saint Lucian decor, plus dramatic views and personal butler service. The resort's only two air-conditioned spaces also are new: a high-tech gym and a fulsome wine cellar and tasting room, presided over by a new sommelier, direct from Bordeaux.

For newlyweds, Ladera has an online gift registry so friends and family can buy the honeymooners extras like spa treatments, meals or excursions. The spa has couples-oriented treatments like Massage Your Mate. And at the bar, lovers can be inspired by the heady Oriole Rum Cocktail, named for colourful Saint Lucian birds that mate for life.

Ladera's new consulting chef, Mark Tan, was recruited from the Montreal gastronomic temple XO in Le Saint-James to oversee al fresco dining in the tropics. Now crafting contemporary gourmet Creole cooking with Asian and French inspirations, Tan's market-fresh fancies include crispy coconut shrimp with fruit salsa, citrus ceviche with cilantro, crab in callaloo leaves, seafood pepper pot, pan-seared duck, curried lamb with caramelized plantains and honey-chili prawns. If you are looking for a meal with sex appeal — and who isn't? — chef Tan also has created a lobster menu for lovers with Saint Lucia's spiny crustacean and rosé Champagne.

Cap Maison, one of the island's newest getaways, is an exclusive five-star estate, a compact community of high living tucked between the calm Caribbean and the restless Atlantic Ocean. More traditionally luxurious than the artisanal Ladera, Cap Maison's top-drawer accommodations are loaded with posh perks like flat-screen televisions, mini-bars and Bose music systems. There are deluxe suites for cocooning couples and opulent villas for families or friends with private pools, large outdoor decks for entertaining and deluxe living rooms, shaded from the sun with slatted shutters and

canopies.

Cap Maison keeps open its kids vs. couples options with two swimming pools, and the choices of fine dining, room service or stocked kitchens. Children can't get enough of the beach, of course, and there are sea kayaks, small catamarans for play in the gentle waves of the bay.

After a languid day at the sea and spa, guests head to dinner at The Cliff at Cap, a superb outdoor bistro with a panorama of the turquoise Caribbean and white sailboats bobbing on the waves. Executive chef Craig Jones creates nouveau West Indian cuisine, an exciting fusion of avant-garde style, Saint Lucia's fresh produce and Japanese and French accents. Some of his creations include: braised short rib of Kobe beef, duck confit and chili butter-poached tiger prawns, as well as artful small plates: apple-caramelized shrimp, leek fondue and the intriguing "study on potatoes with pancetta." And for a variation on wine, Jones suggests a tasting menu with a choice of fine rums.

Cap Maison also has a high romance quotient. In addition to all the essentials for a festive wedding — calypso bands, tropical flowers, photos and clergy for any one of several religions — Cap Maison has some unique no-fail services for lovers. For a bubbly seduction, a bartender zip-lines Champagne down to a secluded deck built over the Caribbean surf. Next, a "proposal concierge" will help to choose The Ring and advise a nervous bachelor on where to pop the big question — on the beach, on a yacht or at a moonlit dinner.

But life isn't only about passionate embraces under starry skies and swooning to the ambrosial perfume of roses, even on dreamy Saint Lucia. Guests can head out for deep-sea fishing and thrilling zip-lining or through the rainforest. Ladera takes guests on a cardio-busting hike to the scenic summit of Gros Piton Mountain. You'll need strong legs, lots of water and an early start for this rocky, strenuous five-hour excursion. Recovery is at hand at the volcanic Sulphur Springs in Soufrière, where bathers dip in mud to relieve aches and pains. Cap Maison's guests also have entry to the St. Lucia Golf and Country Club and the St. Lucia Racquet Club, or get adventurous with horseback riding and kitesurfing. Saint Lucia also is rich with intriguing natural attractions, historic fortifications and a rich Creole culture. Lively towns such as Rodney Bay, Marigot Bay, Gros Islet and Castries pop with spirited festivals, colourful markets, zesty cuisine and sexy costumed dancers. Plus, the Saint Lucia Jazz Festival rocks Rodney Bay every May with such stars as Lionel Richie and Hugh Masekela.

My fave event is the Anse-lay-Raye Fish Fry, a rudimentary two-block street "jump-up" with island music and outdoor kitchens cooking up local delicacies like lobster bisque, roasted red snapper and grilled octopus. Conch, either stewed or grilled, is considered an aphrodisiac. And imbibe with caution. Locals say the potent Bois Bandé, a seething rum moonshine with cinnamon and cloves, is a powerful love potion called the island's Viagra.

Hey, it's Saint Lucia, so seduction is always in the air.

if YOU GO

Tourism info: Saint Lucia, West Indies: 800-869-0377, www.stlucianow.ca.

Flights: Air Canada flies non-stop from Montreal to Saint Lucia (UVF) on Mondays until March 25. From Toronto, flights run Fri.-Sat.-Sun.-Mon. until April 1 and on Sat.-Sun. year-round; 888-247-2262, www.aircanada.com; Air Canada Vacations: 866-529-2079. Air Transat flies on Sundays from Montreal until April 14 and from Toronto until April 28; 877-TRANSAT/ 877-872-6728, www.airtransat.ca. WestJet flies from Toronto on Thurs. & Sun. until April 25; 888-937-8538, www.westjet.com.

Hotels: Ladera Resort, Soufrière, Saint Lucia: 866-290-0978, www.ladera.com; suites from \$400 U.S. for two, including breakfast; for ages 15 and over.

Cap Maison, Rodney Bay, Saint Lucia: 888-765-4985, www.capmaison.com; suites from \$420 U.S. for two, including breakfast; one-two-and-three bedroom villas from \$720-1,180-1,680; infants under 2 stay for free and children 12 and under stay free in certain suites.

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