

Grenada – Isle of Spice feature

By Jeff Louderback

GRENADA -- Though this island's air is alive with the aroma of fresh spices, it is nightfall at Grand Anse Beach that most captivates my senses.

To the calypso sounds of a Spice Island Beach Resort combo, I walk down the 2+-mile stretch of soft, white sand. Though I partially listen the Caribbean version of "Stand By Me," I am focused on distant sites -- the twinkling lights of St. George's, the island's capital, and the backdrop of mountain silhouettes.

A gentle tide meets the shore, and the Caribbean Sea is illuminated by the moonlight and stars that seem close enough to reach. At this moment, there is no other place I would rather be than Grenada.

Mostly remembered by Americans as the island where President Reagan sent troops to thwart socialist rebels in 1983, Grenada is defined by its natural splendor that has changed little since Christopher Columbus sighted the island in 1498.

"Even today, people in the United States wonder, "Grenada, is it safe?" " said Royston Hopkin, the owner of Spice Island Beach Resort. "Many Americans had not heard of Grenada before the U.S. intervention, and many of them have not heard about us since.

"We're hoping to change that," he said. "Grenadians are warm and friendly, and crime here is rare. Grenada is an ideal place for people who want to enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the Caribbean without the crowds."

Dazzling beaches and coral reefs border Grenada's coastline. Dramatic cloud-wrapped mountains, cascading waterfalls and vibrant green rain forests compose its interior. Adorned with architecturally diverse 18th-century buildings along steeply terraced streets, St. George is arguably the most picturesque port in the eastern Caribbean.

In Grenada, called the "Isle of Spice" for its long tradition of spice production, the salt air is heavy with an intoxicating potpourri of nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves and ginger.

Tourism has supplanted spice production as Grenada's top industry. Still, the island maintains its charm as a relaxing hideaway where visitors can hike through the rain forests, snorkel in crystal waters and sun on secluded beaches. Even when cruise ships dock at St. George's horseshoe-shaped harbor, Grenada is not congested, though the island is just 21 miles long and 12 miles wide. Buildings cannot be taller than a palm tree, preventing the construction of high-rise resorts.

Mr. Hopkin is well-versed on Grenada's past and present. His parents helped pioneer the island's tourism industry when they opened the Ross Point Inn in 1951. His mother was the first person, he said, to incorporate island-grown produce and ingredients in

traditional dishes, such as substituting callaloo for spinach, and creating a distinct Grenadian cuisine.

Mr. Hopkin and his brother, Arnold Hopkin, learned the hotel business from their parents. They purchased the Blue Horizons Cottage Hotel in 1978, and later Royston Hopkin bought majority interest in the Spice Island Beach Resort before becoming its sole owner.

Ironically, Blue Horizons and Spice Island were involved in the U.S. intervention. American troops landed on Grand Anse Beach, where St. George's University has a campus near Spice Island Beach Resort, and exchanged fire with Grenadian rebels, who were stationed on densely forested hillside above Blue Horizons.

Though Blue Horizons was not damaged, one of Spice Island's suites was destroyed. The Ross Point Inn, which closed after the intervention, served as a makeshift U.S. embassy. Blue Horizons and Spice Island housed American personnel.

Today, the Spice Island Beach Resort and the Blue Horizons Cottage Hotel are sister properties with separate personalities.

Spice Island, which received a \$6 million facelift and was unveiled as a fully inclusive property last year, is an elegant hideaway on Grand Anse Beach. Decorated with Caribbean-inspired soft pastel hues and rattan furnishings, each of Spice Island's 66 rooms includes an oversized whirlpool tub and a mini-bar stocked with sodas and spirits, such as Carib beer.

Room styles range from the Gardenview and Beachfront suites to the Luxury Private Pool and Royal Private Pool suites. Walled from the outside world, my Luxury Private Pool suite features a garden with vibrant flowers and a small pool outside sliding glass doors. Royal Private Pool Suites include a private pool, sun deck and sauna.

Two hundred yards across the road from Spice Island, Blue Horizons caters to adventure seekers eager to explore Grenada's coral reefs, mountains and rain forests. The 32-room hotel is built around an aviary with 21 species of tropical birds, including the Mangrove Cuckoo. The rooms are modestly priced and feature one-bedroom apartments with kitchenettes, and Blue Horizons has its own swimming pool and poolside bar.

St. George's is a short taxi drive away from Spice Island and Blue Horizons. Its narrow streets are lined with old buildings with red-tiled roofs and hooded windows that rise from the waterfront and seemingly disappear into the green hills. In the harbor, mammoth cruise ships and lavish yachts share the turquoise waters with freighters and multicolored rickety wooden boats. Market Square, established in 1791, is jammed with vendors selling produce, spices and crafts on Saturday.

Even with its steep hills, St. George is best explored by foot. A preferable starting point is Fort George, which provides a panoramic view of the harbor and city, and a lesson in

Grenadian history. Constructed by the British in 1706, the fort has a maze of tunnels, staircases and narrow passageways to explore. It serves as a tourist attraction and the headquarters of the Royal Grenada Police Force.

Fort George was the center of Grenada's civil unrest in 1983. Four years before, then Prime Minister Eric Gairy was ousted in a bloodless coup by the socialist-minded New Jewel Movement, led by Maurice Bishop. The new regime's alliances with Cuba and Fidel Castro worried America, and that concern was heightened when a small group of New Jewel Movement members placed Mr. Bishop under house arrest and took control of the government. It was the execution of Mr. Bishop and several aides that prompted the invasion of Grenada with a joint American-Caribbean liberation force.

"The vast majority of Grenadians welcomed the intervention," Arnold Hopkin said. "Even today, a few signs remain praising President Reagan."

St. George's 19th-century churches are architectural treasures. The Methodist Church, built in 1820; the Presbyterian Church, dating to 1830, and the Roman Catholic Church, constructed in 1884, are worth a visit.

Nevertheless, St. George's Anglican Church is perhaps the city's most beautiful structure. Built in 1825, the stone and pink stucco church has a four-sided clock tower that serves as St. George's official timepiece. Statues and plaques describing Grenada's history are housed at the church.

Though St. George is worthy of a post card, Grenada's natural beauty and rich culture is most visible beyond the capital's boundaries. The island's lush, mountainous interior rises to the 2,757-foot peak of Mount St. Catherine.

North of Sauteurs, a steep cliff descends 100 feet into the sea. Here, at a point called Carib's Leap, native Carib Indians chose to jump to their death rather than surrender to French colonists in 1651.

Woburn, a fishing village in southern Grenada, is home to Conch Mound, where millions of conch shells have been piled by generations of fishermen.

Ecotourism is becoming increasingly popular in Grenada. Dozens of seemingly untouched beaches are reachable only by four-wheel drive. At Levera National Park, where a mangrove swamp is favored by the rare hook-billed kite, waves break over a natural reef that provides a peaceful cove for swimming off Bathway Beach.

Grenada's natural treasure is the Grand Etang National Park and Forest Reserve, where mountainous hiking trails lead to a volcanic crater lake and magnificent waterfalls amid a green rain forest. An ideal starting point is the Grand Etang Forest Center, which details Grenada's indigenous plants and wildlife and offers informative park brochures and maps. Near the center, a short hike along the Morne Labaye Trail leads to an observation tower, which looks down at Grand Etang Lake.

Endangered Mona monkeys make their home in Grand Etang. Wary of humans because they have been hunted to near extinction, these monkeys are often heard in the trees but seldom seen. The amorous "Lover Boy" is an exception. He often frolics around the forest center, entertaining visitors and posing for photos.

Eager for a deep journey into Grand Etang, I call on Jude Pierre, a guide for Henry's Safari Tours Ltd. and a lifelong resident of Grenada. As we leave St. George en route to the disembarkation point for our hike to Seven Sisters Falls, Mr. Pierre talks about his friendship with an American soldier he met during the intervention. Once a year, Mr. Pierre visits his friend, who lives in Coshocton, Ohio, and once a year, the former soldier returns to Grenada.

Grenada's rain forest receives as much as 160 inches of precipitation a year, and on this day, the rain steadily falls. Heeding to Mr. Pierre's advice, I grab a sturdy bamboo stick to help me traverse the muddy, rugged trail which affords incredible mountain vistas and passes by nutmeg, banana and breadfruit trees and several species of palms.

The wind creates a rattling bamboo limb harmony accompanied by a chorus of tropical birds. Rufous-breasted hummingbirds flutter from wildflower to wildflower, sipping the nectar.

Seven Sisters Falls is worth the one-hour hike, even in the rain. Seven Sisters consists of seven waterfalls that cascade down a mountain into pools that beckon swimmers. From the trail, two waterfalls and pools are within view.

Not every journey to a waterfall requires a strenuous hike. Annandale Falls and Concord Falls are accessible by car. At Concord Falls, vendors selling fruit, vegetables, jewelry and refreshments line the narrow road. Concord Falls consists of three waterfalls. Nearest to the road, below a changing station, the main Concord Fall cascades into a natural pool enjoyed by children and adults. An easy hike leads to the Au Coin and Fountainbleu falls, also suited for swimming.

From deep in the rain forest to the heart of St. George, the most noticeable smell in the air is nutmeg, which is so prominent here that the plant adorns Grenada's flag. One third of the world's nutmeg supply is produced on Grenada, and every part of the apricot-like fruit is used.

The aroma of nutmeg is especially strong at nutmeg factories in villages such as Gouyave and Grenville, and at the Dougaldston Spice Estate, where spices have been grown and processed since the early 18th century. Here, visitors can sample the seed pulp from a ripe cocoa pod and relish sweet water from a fresh coconut. An education about nutmeg is provided, too.

The fruit portion of a nutmeg is used for jams, syrups, jellies and spicy liqueur. The nutmeg's next layer, the seed wrapped in lacy red mace, is dried into a honey color and

ground to flavor sweet and savory dishes. Nutmeg shells are used as a surface for pathways.

In Grenada, locals and tourists savor nutmeg sprinkled atop a glass of island rum punch. What better place to experience this concoction than the Nutmeg Bar and Restaurant at St. George Harbor. @subHed:Sister island of Carriacou @ColText:

Traversing Grenada's diverse terrain and savoring its spice-enlivened cuisine and spirits are must-dos, as is a journey to Carriacou, where boat builders still follow designs introduced by Scots in the 19th century.

Covering just 13 square miles, Carriacou is one of Grenada's two sister islands (even tinier Petit Martinique is the other). The Osprey Express ferry departs from St. George Harbor and arrives at a pier in Hillsborough, Carriacou's capital of 600 residents. Here, French and Indian ruins are scattered about Belair National Park. Beaches, such as Anse La Roche and Paradise, are unspoiled.

Hillsborough's main street is lined with small shops and markets, selling Caribbean favorites Vita Malt, a rich non-alcoholic malt beverage, and Ting, a refreshing grapefruit soda. Hillsborough's central attraction is the Carriacou Historical Museum, where European, Indian and African artifacts are housed in a 19th-century cotton mill.

Works from Carriacou's most well-known native, 79-year-old Canute Calliste, are among the museum's displays. In the village of L'Esterre, where Mr. Calliste has lived all his life, he paints in a ramshackle wooden studio the size of a tool shed. Dozens of colorful paintings depicting scenes of Grenadian culture hang on the battered walls.

Wearing a red Coca-Cola T-shirt and a Chicago Bulls cap with his name written in ink on the bill, Mr. Calliste sits in his studio and, in broken English, talks about his signature paintings of mermaids.

It was a mermaid, Mr. Calliste believes, that appeared to him as a 9-year-old boy and granted him the gift of art and music. An accomplished violinist, Mr. Calliste has performed at Buckingham Palace and New York's Lincoln Center. His paintings hang in homes around the world, including the White House.

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