

Adventure Guide to
**Dominica
& St. Lucia**

Lynne M. Sullivan



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About The Author

Lynne Sullivan is a veteran travel writer with a passion for the Caribbean. As the author of multiple travel guides to dozens of islands, she spends much of her time there scouting out a variety of activities, sites, shops, accommodations and eateries. Her goal is to steer readers to the best each island has to offer, whether they are on a short cruise-ship stop, or an extended vacation. Back home in Dallas, Texas, her snorkeling gear and hiking shoes are always packed in anticipation of the next island adventure.

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Introduction

Dominica and St. Lucia tower tall and green over the turquoise waters of the **West Indies**, separated by 60 miles of Caribbean Sea and the French Island of Martinique. They share a common heritage and lay claim to some of the most magnificent acreage in the Lesser Antilles. Both hold tight reins on the galloping development that has run uncontrolled through neighboring islands and, as a result, still offer the pristine countryside and relaxed pace that have disappeared in other parts of the region.

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These two islands are ideal for nature lovers, scuba divers, hikers and bikers. Emerald-green mountains lure you onto trails that lead to hidden waterfalls and hot thermal springs; beaches with black or honey-colored sand beckon to you with the promise of sheltered offshore coral reefs; quiet fishing villages invite you to sample local culture, hospitality, and cuisine.

St. Lucia is the more developed of the two, and luxury-minded travelers will want to check into one of the world-class resorts that feature health spas, gourmet restaurants, and duty-free shops. **Dominica** caters to the just-give-me-a-comfy-bed-and-clean-shower crowd that prefers to spend extra cash on dive packages, hiking guides, and ample beer. There's really no need to restrict yourself. Both islands offer a variety of vacation experiences, and savvy travelers take advantage of the full menu.

Regional History

Pre-Columbian Inhabitants



Ongoing archeological studies conducted on various Caribbean Islands have traced the region's earliest inhabitants back 7,000 years to tribes of wandering fish foragers and plant gatherers of the pre-pottery or Archaic Period. Only sparse evidence of their existence remains, but researchers generally agree that subgroups of the extensive South American **Arawak** tribe followed migrating herds of animals from the eastern slopes of the Andes Mountains, north on the Amazon River

and its tributaries into the Orinoco Valley (in modern-day Venezuela and Colombia). From there, they made their way to the northern coast and continued across the Caribbean Sea (at the time the sea level was about 65 feet, or 20 meters, lower than it is today) to the Antilles Islands.

■ The First Settlements



The tribe split into several groups as it moved up the island chain, and their culture diversified, but their language remained fundamentally the same. People calling themselves Arawaks were discovered on the island of Trinidad by British sailors in the late 16th century, and earlier European explorers found tribes of Arawakan-speaking Lucayo, Igneri, and Taino Indians when they landed on islands in the north- and mid-Caribbean.

Arawak Indians still live in Guyana, Suriname, Venezuela, and French Guiana. However, they have become extinct in the Caribbean as a pure, distinctive race. Most of what we know about these early inhabitants comes from research done by a Spanish friar named Ramón Pané, one of the first Europeans to settle on the island of Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic/Haiti). While his study focused on **Taino Indians**, it is likely other Arawakan tribes had similar highly-developed rituals and sophisticated class distinctions.

Pané wrote that the Taino worshiped images called *zemis*, which they carved out of wood, stone, and other natural materials. These icons, in the form of human and animal figures, are still being uncovered on various Caribbean Islands along with evidence of the ball courts and dance grounds on which the Indians conducted their ceremonies.

From these and other findings, archeologists theorize that the Arawaks had a relatively elaborate system of rank and government, and the people were divided into four classes: slaves (*naborias*), commoners, nobles (*nitaynos*), and chiefs (*caciques*). The chiefs lived in special houses, were entitled to exclusive food and clothing, and received deferential treatment from the other classes.

Minor chiefs ruled only their own village, but the more important chiefs had control over entire districts or provinces. Each chieftainship was inherited through the female line, along with a set of titles and *zemis*. The ancestral idols were presumed to have supernatural powers that granted the new chief magical skills and extraordinary wisdom.

Arawak men wore a breechcloth (*nagua*) made of cotton or palm fibers, and the women dressed in aprons made of the same materials but in various lengths to denote their standing in the tribe. Both men and women cut their hair short and, on ceremonial occasions, painted themselves with figures of their personal *zemis*.

Columbus reported the use of gold ornaments, particularly a pendant (*guanin*) worn by the chiefs as a sign of rank. However, archeological digs have not recovered significant gold objects, and many scholars believe that Columbus exaggerated their use in order to impress the king and queen of Spain.

Other elements of Arawak life are more verifiable. The economy was based on fishing, hunting, and farming, which allowed each village to support a rather large population and an elaborate political and social structure. Village chiefs lived in a rectangular hut or *bohios*, while other members of the tribe lived in round huts called *caneyes*. Both dwellings were simple structures made of wooden frames topped by straw roofs that were sturdy enough to withstand hurricane-force winds. Villagers believed their *zemis* protected deserving humans from illness and storms, and each village and its chief was ranked in importance among the tribes by the number of *zemis* in their possession.

Other Arawakan tribes known as **Caribs** moved into the Antilles region sometime after 800 AD. They were a fierce, belligerent people who traveled through the Caribbean in small groups, sometimes made up of only family members. They lived in little wooden huts arranged around a central fire pit, which was probably the site of tribal meetings.

Village leaders, who were often the family patriarchs, supervised fishing expeditions among the men and farming projects among the women. In addition, they frequently led raids into neighboring settlements to steal valuables and kidnap young women, who became slaves and wives for Carib men. These feared warriors became legend in the Caribbean, and reports spread of cannibalism and ritualistic torture.

By the time Europeans arrived in the region late in the 15th century, the Arawak and Carib cultures had mingled, and the Indians were spending more time on agriculture than fighting. Nevertheless, early explorers were intimidated by the appearance of the natives, who painted bright-colored designs on their bodies and wore shell or stone jewelry in holes pierced through their ears and noses.

Perhaps it was the Indians' appearance that caused the Europeans to overreact and slaughter or capture the natives on sight. The Arawaks quickly were wiped out, but many of the pugnacious Caribs managed to escape and survive. Today, a few descendants still live in an area of Dominica known as Carib Territory.

The Europeans Arrive



Christopher Columbus is generally credited with the European discovery of the Caribbean Islands during four voyages between 1492 and 1502. However, Europeans shunned colonization for

more than a century because they feared the native inhabitants and were disappointed by the absence of gold. **Pirates** took advantage of the disinterest of official governments and used the islands as hideouts.

France and **England** began to recognize the potential value of the West Indies' fertile soil and year-round growing season in the early 1600s. The two countries sent settlers to Dominica and St. Lucia, drove most of the Indians off the islands or onto small reservations, and brought in slaves from Africa to farm the land. For many years, France and England fought over possession of the islands, and today evidence of both cultures is mixed with African influences and native traditions.



You'll find specific historical details for Dominica and St. Lucia near the beginning of each island's chapter.

Land & Sea

Location



Dominica lies between the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea, about 1,500 miles (2,414 km or 1,303 nautical miles) southeast of Miami and 1,763 miles (2,838 km or 1,532 nautical miles) east of Honduras, Central America. The French-aligned islands of Guadeloupe (to the north) and Martinique (to the south) separate the independent nation from other members of the **Windward Islands** of the **Lesser Antilles**.

St. Lucia is approximately 21 miles (34 km) south of Martinique and 26 miles (42 km) northeast of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Sailors can find Dominica and St. Lucia between 13° and 15° north latitude and 60° and 61° west longitude.



*Two distinct island chains run through the eastern Caribbean Sea. The **Greater Antilles** extend west-to-east just south of the Bahamas from Cuba to the Virgin Islands. The **Lesser Antilles** run north-to-south from the Virgins to Grenada, which sits just north of the Netherlands Antilles (Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao) and Trinidad, off the coast of South America.*

The Caribbean



Geography & Topography



Dominica and St. Lucia are volcanic, with steep mountains, deep river gorges, lush forests, tumbling waterfalls, and astonishingly beautiful coastlines. Both islands treasure their natural resources and recognize the value of promoting responsible tourism and conscientious development. Thus, tropical vegetation still covers much of each island, and spectacular underwater reefs are protected by environmental laws.

More than two-thirds of Dominica's land surface is primary rainforest, making it perhaps the most untouched island in the Caribbean. St. Lucia is also predominantly rural, and much of its interior rainforest has been preserved, even though early colonists carved plantations out of huge chunks of the original forest. Modern developers have built exclusive resorts on prime land, and many more would like the opportunity to claim a prize piece of paradise. Nevertheless, conservation groups on both islands are doing a fine job of curtailing the rampant development that has plagued some of their Caribbean neighbors.



*The highest peak in the Eastern Caribbean is Dominica's 4,747-foot (1,424 meter) **Morne Diablotin**. St. Lucia's highest point is 3,118-foot (950-meter) **Mount Gimie**, but its most famous landmark is a pair of pyramid-shaped mountains called the **Pitons**. From a distance, they appear to sit side by side, but actually are on opposite sides of a bay. **Gros Piton** is 2,619 feet (798 meters) high; **Petit Piton** stretches to 2,461 feet (750 meters).*

Climate



As is typical of the Caribbean, Dominica and St. Lucia enjoy a year-round **average temperature** of 77°F. Daytime highs occasionally reach 90°F, and nighttime lows sporadically dip to 55°F, but thermometer readings usually range from 65°F to 85°F in non-mountainous areas. The surrounding waters, on both the Atlantic and Caribbean sides, maintain an average temperature of 80°F throughout the year.

Rainfall varies more dramatically. The driest months fall between mid-November and the end of March, and the rainy season runs from late May through October. Traditionally, the dry winter months are considered high season for tourism, but you should expect brief warm rainfall at any

time in the tropics, especially at higher elevations. During the summer **off season**, you can depend on frequent showers followed by long stretches of sunshine, with the resulting humidity tempered by north-easterly trade winds.

Hurricanes are always a possibility in the Atlantic and Caribbean during the summer and early fall, but the odds of any one island suffering a serious hit in any given year are quite low. The advice from here is be informed, be prepared, and go anyway.

Several agencies maintain web sites that make it easy to track tropical storms as they develop, including the National Weather Service's **Tropical Prediction Center** on the campus of Florida State University in Miami, www.nhc.noaa.gov, and **The Caribbean Hurricane Network**, which posts reports from correspondents living on the islands, www.stormcarib.com.

Companies that provide **travel insurance** sometimes offer policies that cover trip cancellation due to weather. A good travel agent or online insurance-quote service can lead you to a policy that meets your needs. Even if you decide not to buy weather-specific insurance, your airline company, tour operator, and hotel may offer compensation if your vacation is canceled or delayed by a hurricane. Compare the costs and coverage of various policies online at www.insuremytrip.com.



You can find the latest Caribbean weather information and forecasts online at www.caribbean-weather.net (click on "Island Forecasts").

Flora & Fauna

Plants



A wide assortment of tropical plants and trees flourishes on both islands because of sparse development, protected lands, dependable rainfall, and fertile soil. Scrub vegetation along the coasts gives way to dense forests on interior mountainsides, and the volcanic soil sprouts hundreds of species of flowering plants and ferns.

Seagrape trees grow wild along sandy beaches. Some get as tall as 30 feet, and the female bears clusters of fruit that turn purple when they ripen. These "grapes" are edible, but most people prefer them sweetened in jams or desserts. **Coconut palms** also are common on the beaches, and they can grow in sandy areas where few other plants survive. Islanders drink the liquid from the shell before eating the soft meat inside.



The national plant of St. Lucia is the very fragrant pink **cabbage rose**. The national tree is the **calabash**. On Dominica, the national flower is the **bwa kawib** or **carib wood**. It grows wild in dry coastal areas, and bright red flowers bloom along its branches.

Orchids, African tulip trees, ferns, hibiscus and **bird-of-paradise** are cultivated in gardens and grow wild throughout the islands. Even drier land supports colorful bushes such as **oleanders**, and a variety of **fruit trees** grow along the roadways. Much of the local diet is based on the abundant supply of mangos, bananas, papayas, soursops, passion-fruit, guavas and coconuts.

Huge **gommier** and **chatagnier** trees are the tallest and most impressive in the rainforests. They tower over a tangle of vines, ferns, mosses, and more than 300 other types of trees. Drier areas support **cactus** and **cedars**. Throughout both islands, gorgeous **flamboyant** trees (also called **poinciana**) put out a blast of red flowers every summer, and **African tulip trees** turn orange with blossoms each spring.



The **manchineel** tree is dangerous. They typically grow along the coast, and most are identified by signs or a line of red paint on the trunk. The milky sap and small green or yellow fruit of this tree are poisonous and cause intense stinging if they come in contact with the skin. Illness or death can result from eating the fruit.

Birds



You don't have to be a bird watcher to get caught up by the vast number and variety of species that live on or migrate through the northern Windwards. They land on your table when you eat outdoors, tease you while you try to nap on the beach, and steal small items off your patio when you're not looking. The following will help you identify a few of the most common winged creatures.

- The **brown pelican** is grayish-brown with a long neck, long beak, and short legs, and is usually seen feeding along the shore.
- The **magnificent frigate bird** (magnificent is part of its name) has a magnificent wingspan that can reach more than six feet. All of them are jet-black, and the males have red throats, while the females have white throats. They are pirates, and hunt everywhere on the islands.

- The small **green-backed heron** has a distinctive call and gray-green feathers. The **great heron** has long legs and a long black feather growing from its white head.
- The **snowy egret** is white with black legs, while the **cattle egret** (usually seen sitting on a cow) has white plumage and a tuft of orange feathers on its head.
- The **kingfisher** is blue with a white breast and a ruffled tuft on its head. It floats in the air looking for food, and dives into the surf to catch fish.
- The **bananaquit** is a little bird with dark feathers on its back and a bright yellow throat and breast. It loves sugar and will make itself at home on your outdoor table.
- Native **parrots** nest high in the rainforests on Dominica and St. Lucia. The **Sisserou** is Dominica's national bird, and the **Jacquot** holds national honors on St. Lucia. All species are rare and endangered, and you probably won't see one unless you hike with a guide.
- **Broad-winged hawks** are frequently seen soaring in wooded areas.
- Various species of **hummingbird**, especially the **purple-throated Carib**, **green-throated Carib**, and the **antillean crested** are often seen feeding among flowers. The **blue-headed hummingbird** is a rare type found only on Dominica.
- The **St. Lucia oriole**, called a **carouge** by residents, is a black and orange or yellow bird found only on St. Lucia.

Mammals, Reptiles & Amphibians



Wildlife on both islands is rather limited. The good news is, there's not much around to bite, sting, or attack you. The bad news is, there's not much around. Other than rats and mice – which you probably don't care to see – wild mammals are limited to **opossums**, **mongooses** (a ferret-like animal) and an occasional **agouti** (a rodent that looks somewhat like a rabbit).

Reptiles are more common, and you will have no trouble finding frogs and toads. The most interesting is the **tree frog**, which is tiny but puts on a loud symphony at night. On Dominica, you might run into a giant squatty frog known as a **crapaud** who likes to hang out in forests.

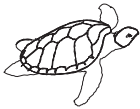
Common geckos – small, plain lizards – scurry everywhere along walkways, through window sills, and up walls (and usually run under some-

thing when you turn a light on at night). Be nice to them – they eat lots of mosquitoes. Native Carib Indians thought they carried evil spirits and spread rumors that they could only be removed from a person’s skin with a scalding iron.

Pygmy geckos are only two inches long, and are found only on St. Lucia. Their color can change to various shades of brown to match their surroundings. **House geckos** hide in dark crevices until nightfall, when they scurry throughout dwellings. They grow to be five inches long, mostly tail. **Tree geckos** grow to be about six inches long. They have an elongated body, stubby tail, and can change color to blend with the foliage.

Iguanas look scary with their spiny backs, but they are strict vegetarians and don’t care to share space with humans. These large lizards are rare and becoming rarer, so you’ll only see them in a few remote areas. The **green iguana** grows up to six feet long, with almost half of the length invested in a whip-like tail. They are on the endangered species list of St. Lucia.

Sea turtles breathe air but live in warm oceans except when the females come onto land to lay eggs. All species of these large turtles are endangered, and require 15 to 50 years to reach a reproductive age, so their nesting grounds on sandy beaches are protected by wildlife societies.



*Despite the ban on hunting **sea turtles**, you may see products made from their shiny shells in markets. Don’t buy them!*

The **leatherback turtle** is the largest in the world – it can grow to eight feet and 2,000 pounds. Long flippers extend from its black leathery shell. **Green turtles** have round, smooth shells and a blunt beak with serrated edges. It grows to be about four feet and 500 pounds. **Hawksbill turtles** have a pointed beak and a brown, gold, and yellow shell. Adults often measure three feet and weigh up to 175 pounds. **Loggerhead turtles** have a large head and tapered shell. They grow to an average of four feet and their weight tops out at about 400 pounds.



*You can get information about, and view pictures of, the most common Caribbean fish on the **REEF** web site (Reef Environmental Education Foundation), www.reef.org; check in “Fish Gallery” under Web Resources, then in Caribbean/Florida/Bahamas.*

The islands do have **snakes**, but not as many as you would expect, and most are harmless. Even the **boa constrictors** are non-venomous, and

shy away from people. However, the **fer-de-lance** snake that lives on St. Lucia is poisonous and extremely dangerous. You're not likely to run into this snake unless you're in tall brush along river beds, but take extra precautions when you hike, especially if you go off heavily used trails.

Island Culture



Most of the residents of Dominica and St. Lucia trace their ancestry back to African slaves who were brought to the islands to work on plantations. Today, as free citizens of independent island nations, the majority live in small coastal villages.

While the population of St. Lucia is growing, recent counts show the population of Dominica is decreasing slightly. The total number of people living on Dominica is now less than 70,000, with about 16,000 living in the capital city of **Roseau**. By contrast, approximately 170,000 people live on St. Lucia, and more than 67,000 live in **Castries**, the capital. These figures are more meaningful when you consider that St. Lucia, with 238 square miles, is a bit smaller than Dominica, which covers 290 square miles.

Language

Officially, **English** is the language of both islands. However, locals prefer a hybrid patois known to scholars as **Lesser Antillean Créole French**. It's a musical dialect, and you may be able to pick out a few recognizable French, English, and Spanish words. In addition, residents of remote villages on Dominica speak **cocoy**, a clipped pidgin English mixed with ancient Carib and Arawak Indian words. Don't expect to understand conversations between islanders, but you won't have any trouble communicating, since most people quickly switch to lilting English when they speak with tourists.

English is taught in schools, and the literacy rate on both islands is steadily growing. **Créole** (also spelled **Kwèyòl**) is the most used language not only on the streets, but also on local radio and television programs. Don't mistake this hybrid with street slang. According to erudite publications, such as the 14th edition of *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, edited by Barbara F. Grimes, Kwèyòl has an established orthography (spelling) and grammar, and is used in literary works, newspapers, and by well-educated professionals during business transactions.

Residents who work for international or tourist-oriented businesses read, write, and speak English fluently. If you're a language buff, or just enjoy knowing a few common phrases when you visit a foreign location, sign onto the Dominican Internet site, www.cakafete.com/kweyol.htm. Here

you'll pick up basic Créole words, such as French-like *bon jou* (good day), *mèsi* (thank you), and *souplé* (please).

Cuisine



West Indies and Créole dishes make good use of locally available seafood, fresh produce, and island spices. West Indian cooking is influenced more by Africa, while Créole cuisine takes its cue from France. Many food items must be imported, so restaurant meals tend to be pricey. If you're on a budget, pick up breakfast at a bakery and make a picnic lunch from supermarket purchases. Some hotels offer "meals included" plans, but signing on limits your chance for excellent meals at local cafés. Plan to enjoy at least some of your dinners at colorful island establishments.



*Most restaurants in the main towns and tourist areas accept major **credit cards**, but it's a good idea to have cash available for snacks or meals at rural cafés.*

Both islands have a few fast-food joints that serve fried chicken, pizza, hamburgers, and sandwiches, but give the local cuisine a chance. Odds are, you'll prefer it.

■ Common Menu Items

- **Accras** or **amarinades**: spicy doughnuts/fritters usually made from cod or other fish, but sometimes from vegetables.
- **Balaou**: small fried fish.
- **Bakes**: a fried dough patty filled with fish or meat.
- **Blaff**: spicy lime-and-garlic bouillon used to cook fish. The word is said to come from the sound the fish makes as it hits the boiling liquid.
- **Breadfruit**: large melon-like fruit.
- **Cabri**: small, bony goat, usually prepared as colombo or smoked.
- **Calalou/callaloo**: soup made with herbs, vegetables, crab, and pork.
- **Carambola**: starfruit.
- **Christophene**: vegetable similar to a potato, particularly delicious when prepared au gratin.