

Dominica

Welcome to the Jurassic Park of the Caribbean

Often mistaken for the Dominican Republic, this small, little-visited island is a perfect eco-hideaway, says **Lydia Bell**

At Indian River, we head up the tidal waters in an open-keeled boat. Elephant ears, wild hibiscus and crab-filled swamp bloodwoods (which bleed red and were used for tattooing by the indigenous Kalinago Indians) overhang the peat-green water. Edging the banks are the tangled roots of mangroves. The waters here are full of mangrove snapper and snook, and barracuda and tarpon that come upstream from the ocean to hunt.

All is silence. This Eden-like spot was named thus because in colonial times, the Kalinago travelled by dugout to the mouth of the river to bring European ships fresh water, crapaud frogs, crabs, cassava flour and crafts in exchange for cutlasses, axes, knives, farming tools and rum casks.

Positioned between French-influenced Guadeloupe and Martinique in the eastern Caribbean, Dominica — the Jurassic Park of Caribbean islands — is mostly overlooked (lots of people said to me: "Have a nice time in the Dominican Republic!"). Its heart is lodged between two volcanic massifs: Morne Trois Pitons and Morne Diablotin. From here, hundreds of streams cascade down to create gorges and waterfalls. The mountainous terrain has few human inhabitants to bother it — its 5,000ft peaks, tropical forests (65 per cent of the landscape is



rainforest), 365 rivers and kaleidoscope of plants and animals remain untainted.

Dominica is not about lying comatose on a sun lounger. There are no brochure-perfect, white-sand beaches, no international airport and few tourists compared with other Caribbean islands. But it offers a life-affirming slug of nature in the raw; an experience that's unparalleled. Dominica is a lush reminder of what the world looked like before overdevelopment and time eroded our nature. Here, it's all about using your two feet: hiking on a vast network of trails, dousing yourself in thunderous waterfalls, boating up jungle-drenched rivers and encountering indigenous strongholds.

I go whale-watching from the Anchorage Hotel, lucky enough to cadge a boat

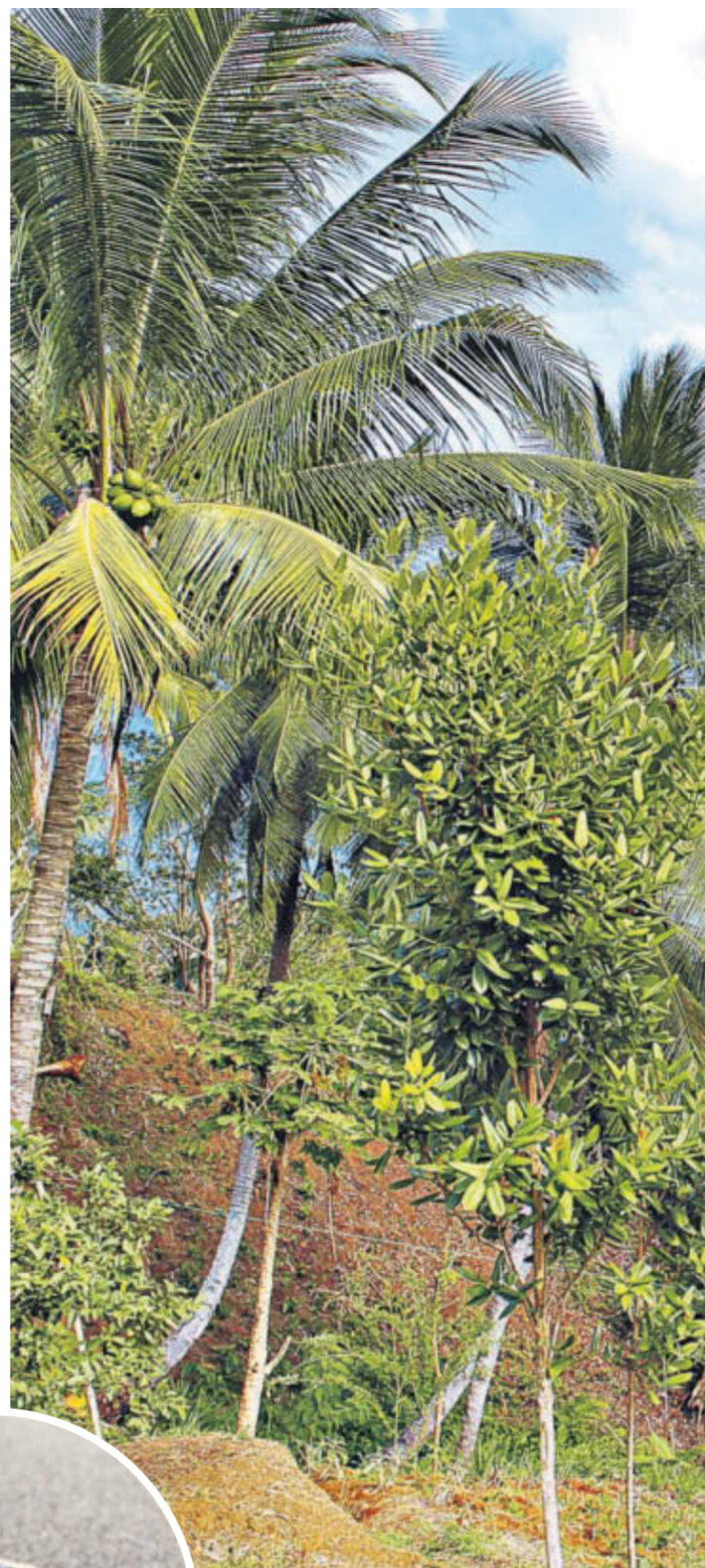
with Derek Perryman, known as the Whale Whisperer, who has been the subject of a BBC documentary. Because of an abundance of deep water close to shore, Dominica is the whale-watching capital of the Caribbean, and there are about 16 species of marine mammal to spot. I am here to glimpse the 200-plus resident population of sperm whales, mothers and calves. Sperm whales clicking to each other on Derek's sonic microphone at 1,200m depth sound like herds of galloping horses. We are lucky enough to see pods of them blowing and breaching.

There's more to be seen later, when at Champagne Reef I flipper through calm waters to see reef fish, a solitary turtle, frog fish, seahorses and soft coral, and a Spanish galleon's cannon, anchor and chains, warm water bubbling from the many volcanic vents tickling my skin. In season, they tell me that between 200 to 300 people pass through here. Today, it's only a Dutch couple diving, and for the snorkelling, a marine biology student and myself.

This wild island is still home to about 3,000 indigenous Caribbean people, who thrive here in eight villages on a 3,700-acre reserve. Many continue to farm, fish, and weave baskets; some even still build canoes. They call themselves Kalinago rather than Carib, the derogatory blanket term used by Columbus's men for the Amerindians who resisted them. From the 1600s, the populations of the smaller, flatter West Indian islands were decimated, but Dominica (whose "other" name, Waitukubuli, means "tall is her body") was mountainous and had many secret corners; intruders could barely get two miles inland. In 1901, a Kalinago reserve was created in the east.

I visit the Kalinago territory, meeting local guide Prosper Paris in the Kalinago Barana Aute ("Kalinago Cultural Village by the Sea"). Over a plate of chicken fricassee, tachin root, hot potato salad, yams and rice and beans, he explains that they are teaching their children dancing, basketry, drumming, history and languages. He rails against Dominica's Europeanised education system, which sends children into formal education at three so there is no time to teach them to make cinnamon-leaf tea, to fish from a dugout canoe with the moon and stars to navigate by, to grow vegetables or make cassava bread.

To get deeper under the skin of the Kalinago culture, you'd need to dip into their homestay programme, which involves keeping it real with pit toilets. Prosper introduces me to lovely Regina Josephs, who is gathering reeds to weave baskets in a thatched hut next to her house, her tiny granddaughter asleep on a mattress on the floor. Visitors stay with Regina for up to three nights, and "eat what I grow or catch", she says. She doesn't go shopping. Instead, the menu might be cassava bread, soursop and papaya from her garden, tomatoes and watercress, citronelle, bush or patchouli tea, fish and sweet potatoes. People go fishing with her, help tend her vegetable garden and cut



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Dominica's Atlantic coastline; below, the capital Roseau; below left, a turtle in Rosalie Bay



cane for juice. Wherever I drive, street stalls sell the overabundance of local produce, which would otherwise be left to rot.

While Regina's programme offers total immersion, there are plenty of comfortable places to stay for those who want to tread a middle line. But the international hotel marques — luxury or otherwise — have left this outpost gloriously alone. You can find lodges with heart, owned by locals or a smattering of expatriates with a long history with the island.

Beau Rive, the homely but elegant plantation-style home of Englishman Mark Steele, is set on a forested east coast cliffside. It's totally secluded, with ten bedrooms, two of which are garden cottages with verandas that look out to the blue beyond. He makes his own chocolates, yoghurt, organic cocoa, bread and preserves. The old-fashioned Fort Young Hotel in the capital Roseau is carved out of the old 1771 British fort, built with Yorkshire stone. Secret Bay in the north is sensational: six self-contained state-of-the-art tree houses where bountiful breakfast baskets and home-cooked meals are delivered to your jungle door. If you wander down to the tiny beach below, you can kayak to an even better one and have it all to yourself for sunset.

At Rosalie Bay Resort, perched in a wild Atlantic spot where the river meets the sea, a turtle conservation project protects the egg-laying season that has gone on since the dinosaurs. My first experience of the wholesome cuisine of Dominica is from the Rosalie's kitchen, which serves hummus, plantain chips

and the crunchiest of salads, coconut-currried vegetables, just-caught mahi-mahi and fresh pastas.

From local goat to land crab and crayfish, there is an abundance of fresh seafood and meat generally on Dominica, best enjoyed at one of the Friday night barbecues, when all over the island you can smell Creole-basted chicken and ribs being grilled over a traditional drum. Locally grown vegetables are in endless supply. The juices are inventive: from West Indian cherry to soursop, sugar cane to tamarind. My favourite meal was the green papaya chicken salad, baked flying fish and freshwater prawns at Papillote Wilderness Retreat, perched on a steep rainforest slope in the interior, which encompasses tropical gardens, a restaurant and guest-house and natural volcanic hot springs.



An otherworldly quality defines Dominica's capital, pocket-sized Roseau, partially explained by the fact that roads arrived here only in the 1960s. Intricate balconies and fretwork mingle with overhanging verandas, porticoes, jalousies, louvres and hurricane shutters, referencing the always-mingled French and English colonial times. At the former slave market, intact down to the cobbles and bars, they sell tourist tat from market stalls.

When I touched down at dusk from flat, dry, sanitised Barbados, I was struck immediately by the contrast of Dominica: the thunderous ocean, the deafening cicadas, the giant moon in the sky and the smell of rain on earth. The wet luxuriant interior of Dominica is its best offering. For centuries it was a mysterious unknown occupied by indigenous people and escaped slaves, while planters and settlers stuck to the coast. The first driveable road was not cut through till 1956, and this sense of uncharted territory remains. At Middleham Falls, we walk an hour through yanga palms to the soundtrack of the mountain whistler, which sounds like a door falling open on a rusty hinge. At the end, a narrow, thunderous stream cascades 200ft from a keyhole notch in the lip of the cliff.

Dominica's pièce de résistance, though, is the Boiling Lake trail. The mother of all hikes, it's a seven-hour round trip and not for the faint-hearted. Along with my guide Derrick Joseph (who was an extra in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* and got to kidnap Johnny Depp), I pad through a jungle to a mini summit and halfway point of sorts with a view of a vast, undulating canopy of green. Then we descend into the rocky, bleak, sulphur-blown Valley of Desolation with its stark palette of yellow, rust-red and oyster-grey, steaming rivers and violent fumaroles, scrambling on our behinds over slippery rocks, through montane forest and elfin woodland on the last leg. At last, we reach the lake, a cauldron of boiling water bubbling fiercely and puffing out dramatic clouds.

The way back is tough: by the last stretch I am dragging my legs and my hands have swelled up. At the bottom, the prize is to swim in a tiny sliver of a gorge surrounded by inky cliffs, which ends in a friendly little waterfall.

On the way we stop at Screw's hot springs, which nestles in raggedy sugarcane. I walk past a sign daubed with the words "Sulphur is Orange, Not Dirty", and lie on my back in the thermally heated water, staring blankly at the swallows whirling in the break in the foliage. With no sense of time, I stay there for as long as I can. When I climb the stone steps out I am handed a plate of freshly diced coconut, pineapple and melon. There's nothing in Dominica that doesn't challenge without offering sweet release.

Need to know

Lydia Bell flew with Virgin Atlantic (0844 209 2770, virgin-atlantic.com), which has flights to Barbados and Antigua from £524. She then took a connection to Dominica with Liat (liatairline.com) from £176

Where to stay
Rosalie Bay Resort (rosaliebay.com) has rooms from £145 B&B; Fort Young Hotel (fortyounghotel.com) has rooms from £71 room-only; Secret Bay (secretbay.dm) has rooms from £236 room-only.
More information
dominica.dm



The quieter Caribbean

Carriacou
Carriacou (below), the largest of Grenada's Grenadines, is all about seafaring, and is a great place from which to explore other corners of the archipelago by boat. Authentic and dozy, it has great diving. The company Down Island has villas with perfect Grenadines views. **Details** Villas cost from \$80 per day for two (islandvillas.com). Fly to Grenada with BA (ba.com) then to Carriacou with Liat (liatairline.com)

Montserrat
Ten miles long by seven miles wide, dinky Montserrat has a volcano that erupted in 1995, and though there have been no rumbles since, many residents moved to the UK. This, combined with the dearth of fancy hotels, silvery, not talcum-white beaches and the lack of an international airport, means Montserrat is pretty empty. Get back to nature at the Mount Pleasant eco-camp, scattered over a lush hillside. The circular thatched "Harmony Cottage" is a perfect yurt. **Details** From \$33 per night for two people in the Harmony Cottage (greenlivingmontserrat.com). Fly to Antigua with BA, then take a Winair flight (fly-winair.sx) to Montserrat

Bequia
Tiny Bequia (top), just seven square miles, has long been a yachties' delight for its sumptuous natural harbour at Admiralty Bay (now frequented by superyachts) and its sense of sumptuous salty seclusion. Its pristine white beaches are overhung with vegetation

and it has a lively social scene — a short plane hop but a world away from Barbados. Dragonfly Villa, a two-bedroom luxury villa, has a veranda overlooking Lower Moon Bay, a half-mile crescent of white sand. **Details** From \$1,200 for a week's self catering for four (dragonflyvilla.co.uk). Fly to Barbados with BA, then take SVG Air (svgair.com) to Bequia

Crooked Island, the Bahamas
The Bahamas has wild pockets: one is pristine, bird-filled Crooked Island, home to about 350 people, with miles of white sand, unspoiled coral gardens and deserted limestone caves. Stay at simple but comfortable Crooked Island Lodge, which has 12 rooms looking over blue waters. **Details** Rooms for two cost from \$150 a night, plus \$65pp for full board (crookedislandlodge.com). Fly to Nassau with BA, then take Bahamas Air (bahamasair.com)

Little Thatch, the British Virgin Islands
The 54-acre private second home of John and Jill Maynard, Little Thatch is just 500 yards off the western tip of Tortola, and is the castaway islet of choice for those who don't want to see other human beings but require their own, palm-shaded powder-white beach with spectacular snorkelling moments from the front door. There's only one place to stay: Seagrape, a cute beachfront cottage. **Details** Seagrape (seagrapecottage.net) costs \$6,400 per week, self-catering for two, including transfers from Tortola. Fly to Antigua with BA and connect to Tortola with Liat

