

# NATURAL SELECTION

## Getting In Touch With Nature On The Caribbean Island of Dominica

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SHE'S ARGUABLY THE MOST gorgeous thing I've ever seen on a beach. A bit larger than my usual taste, perhaps, but there's something tremendously compelling about her sheer mass that refuses to let my eyes be drawn away from her body. Her legs are thick as tree trunks, but solid with muscle; her neck tense from the strain of her efforts. As the light of the full moon illuminates her backside, I realize I've rarely been so excited.

I'm standing on the black sand beach at **ROSALIE BAY RESORT** (rosaliebay.com), an ecotourism haven tucked away on the east side of the Caribbean island of **DOMINICA**, right where the tranquil Rosalie River meets the crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean. It's around 8:30PM, and my partner Mary and I came rushing down from the resort's restaurant after being told about this beautiful behemoth. The lady in question is a 6-foot long, 1000-pound Leatherback turtle, and she is currently in the process of laying her eggs in a hole she dug in the sand, approximately 12 inches across and 18 inches down.

We're here with two volunteers from the **ROSALIE SEA TURTLE INITIATIVE**, which was launched by the resort in 2003 to help protect these endangered species from poachers (who eat turtles and their eggs), and which has proven a leading light in environmental conservation on Dominica. As "Nature Enhancement Team" leader Simon George notates the turtle's size and distinguishing marks in a journal, his assistant sits near her rear end, waiting for the tennis ball-sized white eggs to begin dropping. As they do, he gathers them up and puts them into a plastic bag so they can be moved further up the beach (above the high water line) and buried in a safer spot until they're ready to hatch and be ushered down to the sea.

In the course of an hour, she drops more than 100 eggs, including a few smaller "spacers" that help prevent them from getting crushed. Once she's finished, she uses her massive front flippers to throw sand over the hole, moving in a complete circle around it to completely camouflage the fact that she was ever there. Then, breathing heavy and pausing every few steps to rest, the monolithic mama makes her way back into the sea, with us and 4 other lucky spectators cheering her on every step of the way.

It was a remarkable experience I'll never forget, but hardly the only memorable moment from our extraordinary week on the Nature Island. We'd been told that, if Christopher Columbus were alive today, Dominica is the only Caribbean country he'd still recognize. In our experience, that's not mere hyperbole: This tiny island (population 71,000) in the Lesser Antilles is as unspoiled as any destination we've ever visited, with a full 2/3 of its 290 square miles completely undeveloped. As a result, we had incredible experiences nearly

everywhere we went in Dominica, most of them with virtually no other people around.

On our first day, driver/guide Oris Campbell took us into the **MORNE TROIS PITONS NATIONAL PARK** (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and along a brief section of the 114-mile **WAITUKABULI NATIONAL TRAIL**. Our ultimate destination was **EMERALD POOL**, which we got an incredible overhead view of as we hiked along through the dense jungle.

The pool is a stunning romantic spot, named for the gorgeous green color of its water (which reflects the lush, verdant flora surrounding it) and fed by an impressive waterfall. When we arrived there were three other people there, but all left within 15 minutes, giving us the entire place to ourselves for over half an hour. It was as Eden-like as you could possibly imagine, and we hated having to bid it farewell.

But other incredible activities beckoned,

**DOMINICA OFFERED A WIDE RANGE OF INCREDIBLE OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES WE'VE NEVER HAD ANYWHERE ELSE, AND A SENSE OF PRISTINE EXCLUSIVITY THAT'S TAILOR-MADE FOR THOSE TRAVELERS SEEKING PLEASURES OFF THE BEATEN PATH.**

the most pressing of which was a tour with **ANCHORAGE WHALE WATCH & DIVE CENTER**, which is based in the capital city of Roseau and run by Andrew Armour of Kubuli Watersports. Andrew earned local notoriety as "The Whale Whisperer" thanks to his ongoing relationship with a sperm whale named Scar and his ability to communicate with the whales underwater. The company has a 90% success rate with spotting cetaceans, and our experience didn't disappoint.

After going a few miles out, the captain stopped the boat and a hydrophone was attached to a long pole, which the crew would lower into the water. The sounds were transmitted to a speaker on the boat, and every so often we'd hear the clicking sounds by which whales communicate. Then off we'd head in that general direction. But the sperm whales we were tracking proved frustratingly elusive.

Finally, we discovered why when we spotted a pod of about 20 pilot whales. One of the smallest cetacean species, pilot whales are notorious for feeding on young or weak sperm whales, so our guides suggested that the sperm whales had dived down to avoid this obviously hungry pod. We soon realized the whales were working together to hunt flying fish, swimming just below the surface to herd them to the top, then bursting out of the surf to gobble them down in an eruption of spray. It was incredibly exciting to watch, especially since there seemed to be pilot whales on all sides of us.

*Wherever we went in Dominica, amazing experiences seemed to follow:*

On a visit to the **KALINAGO BARANA AUTE** we learned about the island's original inhabitants, who in 1903 were relegated by the British to a reservation on the mountainous Atlantic coast. Today the area is home to around 3,000 Kalinago (a.k.a. Carib Indian) people. We spent a

great day there learning about Kalinago history and culture, exploring the Kalinago Territory, dancing (hilariously) with beautiful Kalinago women, trying fresh-made cassava bread and shopping for traditional arts and crafts, including the artfully designed hand-woven Larouma baskets for which the Kalinago are known.

A boat tour (guided by a hilarious character nicknamed James Bond, supposedly so named by Johnny Depp when he filmed the Pirates of the Caribbean movies there) down the **INDIAN RIVER** provided spectacular views of the dramatic mountain scenery, close-up shots of ghost crabs and herons, and a bar at the end offered a refreshing beverage of choice (try the mango smoothie with a splash of chocolate) in an idyllic jungle setting.

On a trip to **CHAMPAGNE REEF**, we saw a handful of other travelers there upon our arrival. But they left within 15

minutes, and for nearly an hour we had the entire place to ourselves. The reef got its name because the water is filled with tiny bubbles, fed (and heated) by underground fumaroles that belie the island's volcanic history.

The area provided better-

than-average snorkeling opportunities, with numerous parrotfish, boxfish, eels, angelfish and squid swimming around... but watch out for jellyfish!

In a trendy country like Costa Rica, an attraction such as **SCREW'S SULPHUR SPA** would be swarming with tourists. But when we visited, we were the only people there. It was an incredible place in the middle of nowhere, with lush tropical gardens, roots reggae music on the stereo, a series of volcano-heated pools that varied in heat from near-scalding to tepid, and a waterfall-fed freshwater pool for cooling off at the end. If we'd visited it on the first day of our journey instead of the last, we'd have insisted on going back.

Even the food in Dominica is exceptional, with an emphasis on locally sourced farm-to-table freshness. From the inner-city style of **OLD STONE GRILL**, to the more homey approach of **RIVERSIDE CAFÉ**, to the intimate upscale dining at Rosalie Bay's **ZAMAAN RESTAURANT**, nearly every meal we had on the island was exceptional.

Despite its many pleasures, Dominica faces numerous hurdles in its bid to become one of the world's great ecotourism destinations. There's the lack of name recognition, for one thing: More than half the people we told about our trip mistakenly assumed we meant the Dominican Republic. But slightly more problematic is the island's remote location between Guadeloupe and Martinique: With only one major air carrier flying in sporadically, it required three flights for us to get there from our home in Atlanta.

But, in the end, the arduous journey is definitely worth it. Dominica offered a wide range of incredible outdoor experiences we've never had anywhere else, and a sense of pristine exclusivity that's tailor-made for those travelers seeking pleasures off the beaten path.

