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The Grenadines: Safer sailing in numbers



By **Eric Vohr**
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As a 10-year veteran of sailing Chesapeake Bay and some other amazing waters around the globe, it's hard to name a favorite spot. But the Tobago Cays rank right up there.

The Tobago Cays are an area with a 1,400-acre sand-bottom lagoon of crystal clear turquoise water, surrounded by four uninhabited islands and the 2 1/2-mile-long Horseshoe Reef. It's in the island-chain nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines in the Eastern Caribbean, midway between St. Vincent and Grenada. The easiest way to visit the cays is to use St. Lucia as a home base. There you'll find the best charter options, a convenient international airport and a lot of cool things to check out if you want to extend your vacation.

My photographer and I chartered a sailboat through an outfitter that offers a wide range of boats, from small 36-footers (if you just want to have a romantic getaway) to large catamarans (if you want to bring family or friends). It also offers a new flotilla option that gives you the privacy of your own sailboat as well as the company of like-minded sailors who are all doing the same trip. So you are alone-ish but have plenty of support with safety in numbers.

The flotilla includes a guide boat that has an experienced captain with local knowledge and a mechanic in case you need help. If you're new to sailing, this adds a little security to the trip. Experienced sailors also

enjoy the support as well as the camaraderie of traveling with a group.

Our first day out, we headed south to the St. Lucian peaks of Gros Piton and Petit Piton. These two iconic mountains cradle an amazing bay and marine park that has a nice reef for snorkeling. It's a good place to get your feet wet before setting off on a journey.

The next morning, we started early for a long sail across the channel between St. Lucia and St. Vincent. If I had to say anything negative about our trip, it was this long passage of about eight hours. We had 20-knot winds on the nose and some serious currents and waves. That said, sailing into Bequia was well worth it.

This amazing island was our gateway to the Grenadines. Technically, St. Vincent is the northernmost island in this chain, but the recommended anchorage for sailboats, Blue Lagoon, is many miles from the customs office, a legally required stop. Also St. Vincent (by far the largest and most populated island down in the area) has much more of an urban feel, whereas the tiny Island of Bequia has a nice mix of civilization and natural beauty. The waterfront area with its relaxed seaside cafes and quaint shops is fun to explore. Also, the customs office is right in the harbor, which makes it very convenient.

As a special treat, we made reservations at a well-recommended French restaurant on Admiralty Bay called L'Auberge des Grenadines. It was a bit indulgent, as we had plenty of provisions on the boat, but it's these special moments that really make a sailing vacation. Sitting on L'Auberge's deck, enjoying fresh lobster with one of L'Auberge's many great wines, and watching the sunset on Admiralty Bay was a nice introduction to the Grenadines.

The next morning we had a relaxing breakfast at Frangipani's seaside cafe before departing for the main destination of our trip, the Tobago Cays. As it turned out, it was a serendipitous choice. The cafe owner is the former Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and one of the people who helped make Tobago Cays a protected marine park. (He stopped by our table and gave us a short history lesson.)

When you sail into the Cays, the first people you meet are the legendary boat vendors. These self-appointed ambassador/entrepreneurs with creative names like "Mr. Quality", "More Time" and "More Fresh" will help you find a safe place to drop anchor. They also provide fresh-baked banana bread, fish and lobster, beer and rum, shirts and shorts, and pretty much anything that's lacking. In a remote place like the Tobago Cays, this kind of service is essential. (Check with your charter company, however, for names and hailing frequencies to be sure you're getting a legit vendor.)

The first thing we did in this paradise was to grab our fins and masks and head over to the Baradal Turtle Sanctuary to swim with the green turtles. They don't seem to mind the human intrusion, as long as you keep some distance and don't interrupt them as they graze on sea grass.

When not following turtles, we snorkeled Horseshoe Reef. We also arranged a dive with a local company, Grenadines Dive, which picked us up from our sailboat. The reefs are so healthy here we spotted a wide variety of marine life, including small black-tip reef sharks, spiny lobsters, brightly colored shrimp, moray eels, and southern rays. My biggest moment, however, was watching an octopus eat a conch; that was cool (but maybe not for the conch).

In the evening, we joined the rest of our flotilla on Petit Bateau Island for a fish and lobster barbecue prepared by "Romeo," one of the cays' most famous boat vendors. We were served family style across the long wooden tables with the moon and stars glimmering above. As I dug my toes into the sand and listened to the balmy trade winds gently rustle the palm fronds and sea grapes, there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

We visited a number of other great islands while exploring the Grenadines. But nothing could touch Tobago Cays. This place typifies all that I look for in the Caribbean. If I ever go back, I think I'll spend my entire charter anchored in the Cays. Why waste time searching for paradise if you already know where it is?

Travel writer Eric Vohr and photographer Michaela Urban have an eco-travel website travelintense.com.

If you go

Getting there

Miami (MIA) is the chief connecting point to St. Lucia (UVF), but airfares vary widely between Florida cities and some major Northern airports, with Florida cities getting the higher fare. For example, flying from JFK in New York starts at \$472, connecting to St. Lucia via Miami. Simply leaving from Miami costs \$667. Chicago also pays a Miami-like rate.

Staying there

Prices for hotels or restaurants are in USD and include tax and service charges (each 10 percent).

Anse Chastanet Resort, Anse Chastanet, St. Lucia (ansechastanet.com): High-end bungalows, semi-private beach, mountain biking, snorkeling and scuba. Bungalows from \$426 daily.

Balenbouche Estate, Laborie, St. Lucia (balenbouche.com): Beautiful cottages nestled in a 100-year-old sugar plantation with a private but lovely little beach. Starting at \$150.

Eating there

Dasheen at Ladera, Jalousie, St. Lucia (ladera.com/dining/restaurants): Luxury dining with a hilltop view overlooking the Pitons and Jalousie Beach. Entrees start at \$43.

L'Auberge des Grenadines, Admiralty Bay, Bequia (caribrestaurant.com): French cuisine with live lobster pool, overlooking the bay, private dinghy dock, great wines (entrees start at \$18)

The Frangipani, Admiralty Bay, Bequia (frangipanibequia.com): Dinner entrees start at \$40; you can also stay in rooms with harbor view, starting at \$78.

Sail charters

We used Sunsail, Rodney Bay, St. Lucia, because of its large boat selection and the flotilla option (sunsail.com). Prices vary significantly depending on the season and type of boat. In May (off season) a flotilla trip on a 41-foot monohull bareboat is \$6,443 for 14 days. In March (peak season) the same boat is

\$10,296 for 14 days. See the tourist sites below for other yachting options.

Diving

Grenadines Dive, Clifton, Union Island (grenadinesdive.com).

Info

St. Lucia (stlucianow.com)

St. Vincent and the Grenadines (discoversvg.com)

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