

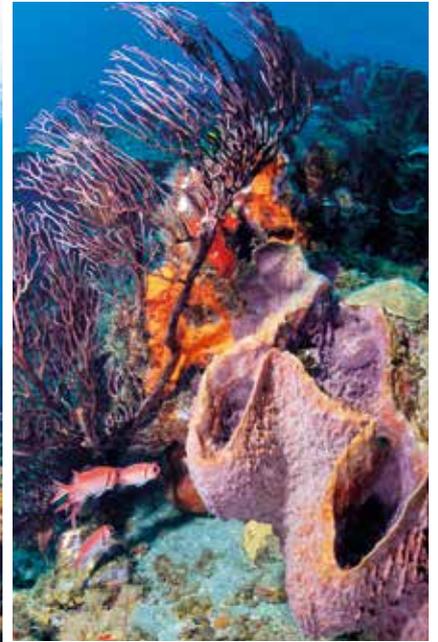


# ST LUCIA

*A SPENDID  
Caribbean Original*

AL HORNSBY has travelled all over the Caribbean, but even he was seduced by the natural splendor of St Lucia both above and below the surface of the water

Photographs by AL HORNSBY



**A**rriving into St Lucia, one of the British Windward Islands that arch through the southeastern Caribbean Sea, is visually stunning, with the sight of a rugged, jungle-covered volcanic isle that rises steeply from a cobalt ocean. The interior is rainforest, with stands of hugely-girthed trees, dotted with massive volcanic cones. The island is, indeed, regarded as one of the most-beautiful places in the Caribbean.

For most visitors, especially divers, the first order of business will be an hour's drive from the airport to the main tourist-diving area along the southern west coast, which takes you past quaint, local towns and through some of the very scenic mountain areas. Rather than being a chore that must be endured after a long flight, for most it is an eye-opener to the many visual splendours and opportunities St Lucia has to offer.

Emerging from the forest, your first view of the blue and turquoise sea, with its fringing, golden beaches and swaying palms, can near take your breath away. Nearing the coastline toward the town of Soufriere, which sits at the water along the Soufriere Marine Management Area - where St Lucia's most well-known dive sites are located - the scene is majestic, as the vista becomes dominated by two, towering volcanic spires rising at water's edge, the 743-metre-tall Petite Piton, and beyond it, Gros Piton, reaching 771 metres.

Therein lies the inherent conflict - for even the most-ardent diver, it soon becomes obvious that some fair amount of out-of-water time will have to be set aside to explore this enchanting place. After all, there are jungled hiking trails up both Pitons and to the island's tallest peak, 950-metre-high Mount Gimie, where, if lucky, you may spot St Lucia parrots and dazzling hummingbirds, and hear the remarkable songs of the St Lucia warbler. You can visit the Caribbean's only 'drive-in volcano', where you can soak in the hot mud - 45 degrees C - of its bubbling, sulphur springs. You can explore the local Creole culture, which has resulted, since the beginning of the 16th century, from its French, African, Dutch and English influences, with marvelous

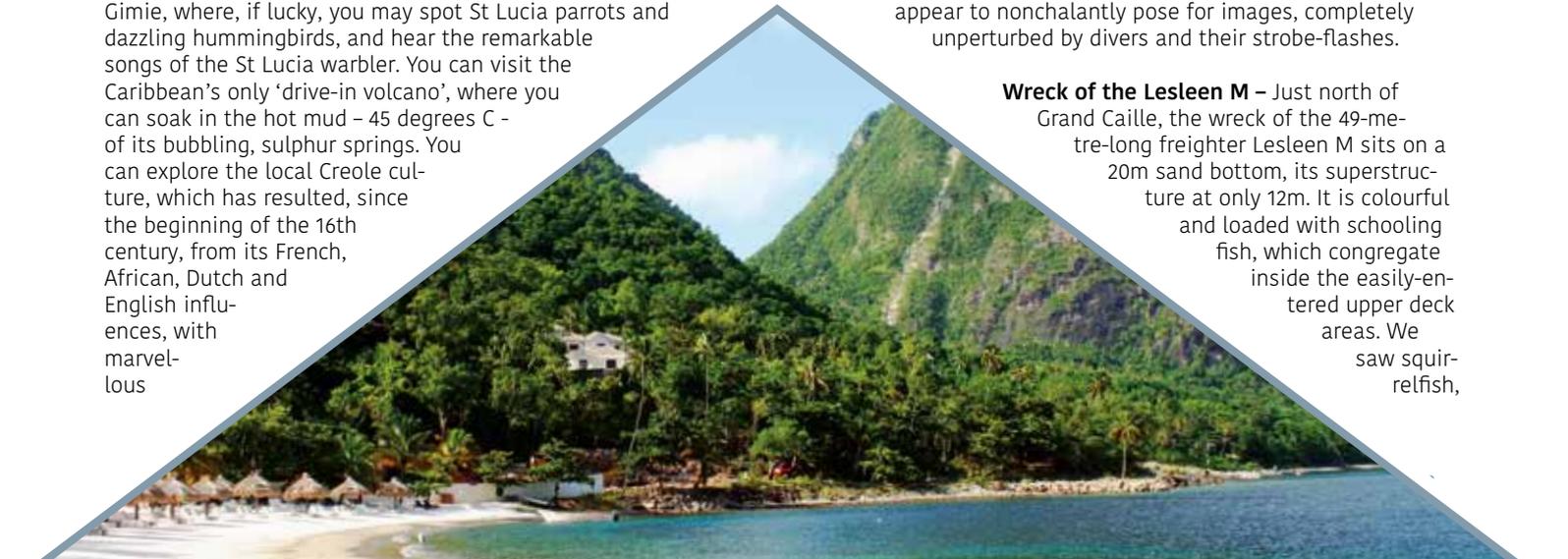
expressions in food (St Lucia is famous for its cooking), song and art.

Fortunately, especially because the dive routine is so convenient, with super-short boat trips and some great off-the-beach diving, even several dives a day leaves time for these other (not-to-be-missed) pursuits. Or, just plenty of time to enjoy the famed - and unique, actually - St Lucia rum punch.

All these other pleasures aside, it's the diving that brings folks like us to St Lucia - and it's something special, indeed. For the American diving community, St Lucia found its fame in the early 1980s as a unique, out-of-the-mainstream dive destination, which attracted (especially) diving photographers, at a time when diving was not particularly known in this part of the Caribbean. Then, as now, the diving featured beautiful, life-filled reefs, sea mounts and walls in calm, protected waters; and, just off the beach in quiet coves, grass beds and coral flats teeming with macro and small critter life, such as seahorses, flying gurnards, snake eels, octopus and more.

With many sites to choose from, some of my favourites are:  
**Grand Caille** - Just north of Soufriere, Grand Caille is a large, sprawling reef that slopes from the shallows into deep water. It is practically covered with orange, red and encrusting sponges and large, barrel sponges, coral mounds and stands of purple, deep-water gorgonians. Swirling above the reef are clouds of damselfish, and around the bottom are many reef species, such as porcupinefish, angelfish and butterflyfish. Especially numerous are common lionfish, a Pacific and Indian Ocean species that has made its way into the Caribbean in recent years. With few natural predators in these waters, they seem fearless, and appear to nonchalantly pose for images, completely unperturbed by divers and their strobe-flashes.

**Wreck of the Lesleen M** - Just north of Grand Caille, the wreck of the 49-metre-long freighter Lesleen M sits on a 20m sand bottom, its superstructure at only 12m. It is colourful and loaded with schooling fish, which congregate inside the easily-entered upper deck areas. We saw squirrelfish,





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bigeyes, tomtates, goatfish, snapper and individual trumpetfish, in numbers. Brightly-hued gorgonians hung from the ceilings and passageways, encrusting and tube sponges grew in profusion, and blue runners and jacks circled about. Down on the sand near the hull, there were a number of garden eels and several small southern stingrays were seen. It is an interesting, easy wreck dive, well-lit for photography.

**Pinnacles** – Another nearby site is Pinnacles, four seamounts that rise up from deep water to reach near the surface. It is one of St Lucia’s most-dramatic dive sites; in very clear water, the spires are covered in black and orange gorgonians and large sponges and surrounded by schooling snapper and jacks. Grouper are seen along the rocky surfaces, and brightly-coloured crinoids extend their arms out from crevices, in surprising numbers. Green turtles are frequently seen, along with resident barracuda. Dive profiles – starting as deep as you would want, then meandering your way around the spires in an ever-ascending route – are ideal, never wasting a moment of bottom time.



**Superman’s Flight** – Probably my favourite St Lucia site is Superman’s Flight, an exciting current-drift dive that runs along the base of Petite Piton, where it dramatically rises straight up from the sea. So named for a down-the-face flyby in the Superman II movie, especially when the current is up, divers are provided fly-bys of their own, along the steep underwater wall of the piton. An especially rich area, the wall has masses of gorgonians, sponges and corals, with lots of fish moving about. In the many crevices that splinter the volcanic rock, it was easy to tuck in, out of the current, to find smaller life and even comfortably shoot macro (which I did on one dive). The small life was actually quite remarkable, with more arrow crabs than I have ever seen, not hidden in holes in the reef, but out in the open, wandering about, unusual in daylight hours. Additionally, there were a number of different shrimp species, including banded coral shrimp and brilliantly-colored Pederson cleaner shrimp, equally unperturbed by our presence. Notably, there were surprising numbers of smooth trunkfish, meandering about the bottom – a

species known to predate on small crabs, shrimp and gastropods. Also unique were the large numbers of feather duster worms, which seemed to flare out everywhere from openings in the many sponges that grew about the bottom; and bright, almost luminescent-pink vase sponges were seen at practically every turn.

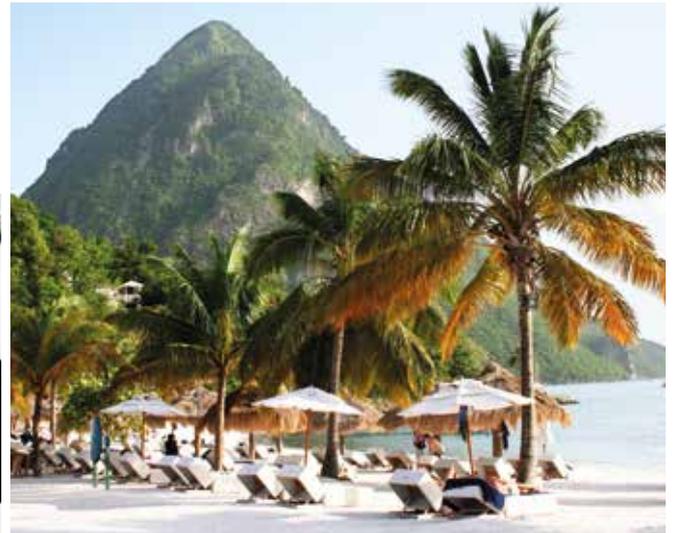
**Anse Chastanet Reef** – By all accounts St Lucia’s original popular dive site, this lovely spot begins just off the beach in the cove that is the home of the popular Anse Chastanet Resort. It’s existence has not only been one of the keys that popularised St Lucia diving beginning in 1981, but is an aspect of the easy, no-lost-time dive availability that helps makes St Lucia unique (and helps provide the time to enjoy the island’s many topside activities mentioned). With PADI five-star dive centre Scuba St Lucia located on the sand, at water’s edge, a dive, whether it be early morning, between boat dives, in late afternoon or after sunset, and all times in between, is a matter of suiting up along the low wall between the centre and the water, taking a few steps across the sand, and – voila – you are on a dive.

The underwater terrain, in flat-calm, clear water, begins as sand and quickly changes to patch-reef just a few metres offshore (or grass-bed, depending on which direction you head, and what kind of marine life you are looking for). Ideal as an easy dive, with depths eventually extending down past 30m along the coral-covered slope, it is special for macro photography in the shallows, for larger fish and turtles among

the corals deeper. Its bright, calm conditions are also great for snorkelling. In my two, quick, between-boat-dive dives there, we saw octopi, a peacock flounder, goldspotted snake eels, two species of tilefish, juvenile boxfish, trumpetfish and many more (some quite unusual for broad daylight), as we searched the grass-bed and the edge of the reef in less than 6m of water. (I’m told that the night dive critter-finding is particularly superb.) There were two, special species common to the reef, however, that we didn’t get to see this trip – the slender seahorse and the flying gurnard (oh, well – next time).

## CONCLUSION

While there are rave reviews and many excellent reasons for visiting St Lucia – as singles, couples, families, honeymooners, hikers and others will all tell you, there is an even more expressive group. Yes, you guessed it – divers. ■



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