

# Par, Ponies, Pufferfish and Pitons

By Chris Robinson



**“Neat!”**

*said 8-year old Timmy.*

**“Cool!”**

*agreed 13-year-old Pip.*

These highest accolades from the younger generation were occasioned by their first sight of the Pitons – twin pyramid mountains that rise improbably half a mile straight up from the Caribbean, on the beautiful island of St Lucia.

And they are certainly a breathtaking sight as you travel south by road from the capital town of Castries via a series of bays, sleepy fishing villages and steep valleys to emerge from the dark green of the verdant rainforest on to a shoulder of a hill bathed in sunshine. We wondered how these fabulous peaks could have remained hidden from our view when they now appeared so spectacularly and suddenly, towering over the picturesque town of Soufriere in the valley deep below us. They are an icon of St Lucia and of the whole Caribbean.

The boys repeated that same high praise when we ventured into the Soufriere Volcano, a couple of hair-pinned miles above the town. Billed as the world’s only drive-in volcano, it is really a collapsed volcanic cone that is bubbling, stinking and hissing morass of boiling mud-pots and steaming streams. Smoke rises over 50 feet above the surrounding rainforest, yet it’s quite safe – so long as you do not stray from the paths.

Nearby, and associated with this benign geological power, are the Sulphur Springs at Diamond.

***If Soufriere Volcano provides a textbook image of Hell, then the idyllic springs are the balancing vision of Paradise.***

In a setting of tropical gardens redolent of cinnamon and exotic spices, therapeutic volcanic waters have been harnessed since the eighteenth

century to provide warm baths, initially for Napoleonic troops and now for fortunate travellers. Here you can relax in the 40 degree Centigrade pool amid rainforest beauty to the sounds of the raucous forest birds and the splashing of Diamond Falls close by...

St Lucia is a small island – only 43 by 22 kilometers – but it packs so much into this compact land that it is difficult to make choices from the many activities and sights that it has to offer. There are rainforest walks, historical tours (the island changed hands 14 times between the French and the English!), turtle and whale watching trips, plantation visits, eco-tours to see the unique St Lucia parrot and other endemic wildlife, ATV and bike touring, island-hopping (to neighbouring Martinique and the Grenadines) and, of course, island tours to take in the many waterfalls and gardens of this colourful vacation spot.

Elsewhere in this magazine there are articles on golf and scuba diving: here on St Lucia you can combine both wonderfully, though preferably not simultaneously!

The St Lucia Golf and Country Club is a 6,815-yard, par 71, championship golf course that is friendly enough to encourage vacation golfers, yet challenging enough to satisfy serious golfers too. Its 18 holes of rolling terrain are situated in Cap Estates, an exclusive community in the north of the island and very convenient for the majority of the hotels. The club features a 350-yard driving range, a golf academy, clubhouse and pro shop; club rentals and lessons are also available. But what captivated me about the course was the scenery. The north of the island is less mountainous and wet than the south – hence the rainforest gives way



to more open vistas of tropical vegetation and rolling hills. And most memorably, there are magnificent views of both the Caribbean coastline to the west, and the wild Atlantic shore to the east. You will be lucky to get close to par, but you will remember the views forever!

Diving is excellent in the clear waters off the island, with visibility often up to 100 feet and reefs only 15 feet below the surface. There are several good diving operators in St Lucia – perhaps the best known is Scuba St Lucia at Anse Chastenet, a legendary dive location in the Caribbean. There are several unique dive sites to explore. Fairy Land is a magical underwater garden of colourful sponges and corals right by Anse Chastenet. Superman's Flight is for the more adventurous – here a wall drops 1600 feet into the depths and scenes from the second Superman movie were shot here. And for night divers, there is the potential frisson of meeting 'The Thing', St Lucia's answer to the Loch Ness Monster...Pip was particularly attracted by the fact that

***Together, we swam in the warm seawater almost as one entity, hands grasping manes, arms around muscular equine necks, until we reached shallower waters. It was an extraordinary and soul-touching few minutes.***

Scuba St Lucia will accept youngsters from 12 years up; his most treasured underwater encounter was with a pufferfish that blew itself up like a spiny soccer ball when he got too close for its comfort!

Next day, we were at the interface of air and ocean, hanging on to a tousled mane for dear life, while up to our shoulders in seawater. We had gone for a family horseback ride at Trim's Stables, in the central hills of the island. A gentle meander through sandy woods brought us to a deserted, sheltered cove on the Atlantic



Ocean coast. We stopped for drinks in the shade of a palm tree, while Rusty – our exuberant and expert escort – removed the saddles from the horses. "You won't need these where you're going!" he jested. Now bareback on our trusty ponies, we followed Rusty one-by-one into the Atlantic Ocean. The waters rose. Both Rusty and our mounts knew where the drop-off was, but it came as a thrilling and then a delightful

surprise to us, when the horses took a subterranean hop out of their depth. Together, we swam in the warm seawater almost as one entity, hands grasping manes, arms around muscular equine necks, until we reached shallower waters. It was an extraordinary and soul-touching few minutes; I can only liken it to swimming with dolphins in my experience. The boys' eyes were like saucers and they could talk of nothing else as we regrouped on the pristine beach and headed back to the stables through the woods filled with humming birds.

Nothing could quite top that experience, but our leave-taking came close. As a surprise, I booked our trip back to the airport on the southern tip of the island by helicopter. Pip and Timmy were wowed by the flying experience itself, while Dara and I watched as the by now familiar bays, rainforest and finally those magnificent Piton mountain spires slid by, so tantalizingly close. It was a fitting conclusion to a memorable vacation experience.

## Travel Notes

Sunquest Vacations features one and two week vacations from November to April to most of the resorts on St Lucia, including Club St Lucia by Splash, an excellent all-inclusive family and sports resort, where Chris and his family stayed.

St Lucia Golf and Country Club,  
Cap Estate: [www.stluciagolf.com](http://www.stluciagolf.com),  
tel (758) 450 – 8522  
Scuba St Lucia, Anse Chastenet:  
[www.scubastlucia.com](http://www.scubastlucia.com),  
tel (758) 459-7755

Insiders tips: Take a horseback excursion at Trim's Stables, tel: (758) 452- 8273, for a romantic ride to the Atlantic Ocean - \$55 USD per person for a 2 hour ride. Also, consider paying the \$100 USD supplement for the helicopter trip one way from the airport to your hotel or vice versa (bookable via Sunquest)– it is a riveting and unforgettable way to see the island from on high.

