

# St Lucia:

## Waiting to welcome Middle Easterners and Muslims

By Karen Dabrowska



Saint Lucia water front.

الواجهة البحرية لسانت لوشيا.

"I haven't ever had a guest from the Middle East", says Andrea Abraham who runs a modest guest house, Talk to Me Cool, on the tiny Caribbean of St Lucia.

Her guest house, like many tourist resorts in the Caribbean is a victim of September 11th. Bookings and tourist numbers dropped sharply and many small hotels closed after the atrocity. The Caribbean has never been popular with Muslim tourists but Andrea assures them of a warm welcome. She is wary of anyone with links to Al Qaeda. "But there are good and bad

people in every society" and Andrea is convinced there is little chance she will meet "the bad ones".

Tourism in the Caribbean takes two forms: the sun and fun variety popular with some Westerners who frequent the bars and enjoy the night life and the Caribbean which Muslims would be comfortable exploring: family guest houses, nature walks, tours of historical sites and plantations and dinners in the beach front restaurants looking over a calm ocean and magical sunset.

The Caribbean was once the playground of the rich out of the reach of the average tourist. But Virgin Atlantic's flights – some £450 return, others only £199 – and a mushrooming of guest houses run by the locals for around \$35.00 a night has turned it into a popular holiday destination.

The slogan adopted by the St Lucian Tourist Board: Simply beautiful sums up the island's character. There are mountains, the most famous being the Pitons, unspoilt beaches, ➤

banana plantations, rainforests with exotic flowers, immaculately kept gardens, a drive-in volcano and friendly people whose welcome is from the heart.

Soufriere, the island's first capital, is a town of contrasts with something different around every corner. Along the waterfront the tragic effects of a hurricane which devastated the island in 1999 are evident from the shanty town with its wooden huts and corrugated iron structures. Tragically the town has suffered from many bad weather days and natural disasters: it was pummeled by hurricanes in 1817, 1898 and 1980. An earthquake struck in 1839 and in 1955 half of Soufriere was burned down.

Many of the towns inhabitants are poor but rich in spirit, treasuring whatever each day brings. The Old Courthouse Restaurant dates back to 1898 – its bathrooms were once the courthouse cells. Like most restaurants it serves a variety of Caribbean dishes heavily reliant on fresh seafood, fruits and exotic vegetables.

On Fridays the waterfront becomes the local market: fish, vegetables and fruit are the most popular items on sale.

The French influence from colonial days is evident from the buildings in the main street and around the town square with second floor balconies and intricate decorative woodwork. The French are also largely responsible for the magnificent botanical gardens in the Soufriere Estate which started life as an 18th century sugar plantation on a 2000-acre land grant bestowed by Louis XIV to the Devaux family in 1713. The mineral baths are built on the site of the first baths commissioned by the king when he realised that the estate's hot springs had the same curative minerals as those of French and German spas.

In the town square, from which buses (in the form of mini vans) leave for the capital Castries and other towns, the Lady of the Assumption Church, built in 1953, is worth a visit. The streets surrounding the square have an internet café with soft music and local songs with a religious flavour, supermarkets where anything imported is very expensive and Camilla's Restaurant with a charming second-floor veranda overlooking the street.

Other scenic attractions include the drive-in volcano which erupted around 40,000 years ago. The area is shrouded in legends



Lady of the Assumption Church.

كنيسة سيدة الصعود.

claiming that the Arawak Indians used the site for human sacrifice. The caribs called it Qualibou – the place of death.

Guest houses like Talk to Me Cool are family affairs where visitors quickly become one of the family. Michael Abraham and his wife Andrea are probably the town's best tourist guides. Over breakfast they provide an insight into life in Soufriere and St Lucia.

Guests are collected from the airport: sightseeing starts with the drive to Soufriere through small fishing villages and towns.

Simple is the key word on St Lucia: there is beauty in the simplicity of a walk along the beach, a quiet dinner in a local restaurant, a quiet talk who people have forgotten about yesterday and have no worries about tomorrow. ■