

## Podcast 108: Caribbean on a Budget Part One

*{INTRO: waves on a beach (in Soufriere, but that's not specified in the soundclip) ASMR}*

*{intro music – jaunty, bouncy}*

*{Intro standard announcement:*

*Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}*

*{Music fades. Podcast begins}*

Hello :)

Not a great deal has happened in the last fortnight, certainly nothing that's really of any significance to talk about in the introduction of this podcast episode. It is getting to the stage of the year where my weekly running group are using headtorches; we didn't need them too much on last week's run because we were mainly on canals and suburban roads, but in a couple of weeks time it'll be dusk at the start of the run, never mind the middle, and that's before the clocks go back at the end of the month.

Our Christmas tree is still up and still providing multi-coloured joy in a drab world. And it is a drab world. But we all need to do what we can to give ourselves as much joy as we're able; it's hard to fight for other people if you find it difficult to fight for yourself, after all, and we all need to be as strong as we can be.

I had a friend visiting me a couple of weekends ago; my old school friend Alistair. I'd been trying to get him to visit for a while, but he's about as tricky to get to commit as I am, arguably for similar reasons. He's been a guest on this podcast a couple of times; I did fully intend to get him to record some things for future episodes while he was here but, well, we didn't, because we were distracted, mainly by beer. In related news, Laura has now finally had the Pabst Blue Ribbon that's on tap at the micropub in Todmorden and can confirm it is exactly as she remembers. This is neither a compliment nor an insult; nostalgia definitely affects the way we approach things, especially foods and drinks. It's not going to be many people's favourite beer though.

My paid day job might be getting more interesting; I've sometimes mentioned in passing that my role isn't the most fulfilling, and while that sounds like a slight on my workplace, I need you to be under no illusions about this; they are fully aware of my thoughts and have been on the receiving end of my rants for over two years. Anyway, finally, it looks like I'm being utilised to help my colleagues in another department, and this will, as a sideline, enable me to use tools and products around website analytics and SEO that, let's be honest, might come in very useful in my travel blogging sideline. SEO is one of those topics that comes up a lot in blogger conferences but no-one can really face when the workshops are scheduled for 9am on a Sunday morning. And the average travel blogger is not a data analyst. A better question is: can I maintain my focus and interest long enough to do anything about this.

I have still not done what I need to do in order to get ADHD medication. It's on my list. Quite a few things are on my list. Some of them are time-sensitive. There's a certain irony to all of this, and one that ADHDers, which needs a better descriptive word, know only too well.

I notice it was also World Mental Health Day last week. I've spoken about that kind of thing before on a couple of dedicated podcast episodes and it's not something I'm going to mention again now, except that I'm in the middle of an interesting conversation with my therapist about repressed emotions and how it is that I rarely get excited about things, and I'm mentioning that here because it seems apt when you're doing a podcast about somewhere that's effectively someone else's bucket list but when asked about your trip, all I can respond is 'yeh it was okay'.

And it was okay. As you'll now hear.

*{section separation jingle}*

So, one might ask, why is a non-swimming easily-bored less-than-aesthetic enby with Celtic skin (and all the sun resistance \*that\* doesn't entail) spending two weeks in the Caribbean? Wasn't four days in Maldives enough to satisfy the tropical beach itch?

Apparently not.

There were actually several different concepts at play here that meant this was an obvious trip to take. The most pressing of course, the aeroplane in the room as it were, was the whole '100 countries in 50 years' thing – the Caribbean is in principle an easy way to knock off several countries from the list in quick time, given they're all quite small and relatively close to each other. In fact this was slightly trickier than it sounded, logistically, but I'll come onto why in a moment. Regardless, with a bit of planning and forethought it was a much simpler chance to advance quicker to my target than, say, two weeks in East Africa.

Not that it was entirely a country-counting exercise because, if I'd wanted to do that, I'd've just taken long weekends to Algiers and Nouakchott. The Caribbean isn't a part of the world I knew a lot about, and I'll be honest I'd never really looked into. Partly this is because in my head they were a series of small hot islands full of honeymooners, and it never occurred to me that I'd want to go. Even if I had looked into them more I think they'd've been the sort of place I wouldn't necessarily have thought to go to on my own, because I'd be worried I'd get a bit bored.

As you all should know, my friend and common travel companion Laura, is American. You'd've thought, as an American, she would have known much more about the Caribbean than I did, given that, you know, they're Right There, and Americans visit that part of the world in the same way we in the UK tend to visit the likes of Spain and Greece. You'd've thought that, but you'd've been wrong. Laura's quite willing to admit it was almost embarrassing to have been around the world but never set much foot in her own backyard, aside from one cruise many years ago that focussed more in the Central American coast than the islands anyway. So when we looked into the possibility of doing a trip that way, she felt it was kind of about time she went.

Another thing that drew her to the Caribbean for this trip, as opposed to anywhere else in the world, was that Saint Lucia had been on her bucket list for quite some time, so she was more than keen to grab the opportunity while it was available. That said, she'd always imagined going with a boyfriend or a lover. Or, at the very least, someone who could swim.

Another factor though in our decision was that we'd been to Maldives earlier in the year, and Laura was still hankering after a decent beach trip. For me I figured it would also be interesting to compare and contrast with a different kind of tropical destination; a whole style of trip I still have very little experience of and which is slightly outside my comfort zone as a result. In addition, there was also the thought of, like Maldives, the Caribbean is generally a place you go to for resort holidays, but with the additional option of cruises. Who listening hasn't got in their mind right now a two-week cruise popping by some of the lovelier Caribbean islands, and Haiti, for excursions or overnights in exclusive walled compounds surrounded by retired white people.

As an aside though, there's a cruise on offer called “Honky Tonk and Hoedowns” that's two nights in Nashville, one full day at Dollywood, then 6 nights cruising to The Bahamas, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands, Honestly, it's tempting. I've never worn cowboy boots in my life, but life's too short to be beige,

But our Caribbean trip would, of course, not be like that. We were interested to see if it were even possible to travel independently, slowly, and locally, through the region they way most holidaymakers don't. Because we're trend-setters, and on a budget,

However, the fundamental premise was one of our early planning nightmares. Because so few people travel the Caribbean independently, or rather, because so few people travel independently to multiple destinations rather than staying put on one island for a week, we had trouble with inter-island transportation.

For example, there was an infrequent ferry service between Grenada and one of the islands in the Grenadine archipelago, however a hurricane a few years ago knocked out one of the ships. A second ship was sourced ...

which itself got knocked out in the hurricanes the following year. And to the best of our research, was never replaced.

The problem we had here was a combination of a lack of previous travellers having done these journeys, coupled with a whole myriad of companies and contact information which was severely outdated – one ferry company I found online had a website whose last timetable update was in January 2020, another suggested contacting one country's national ferry board only to find their official e-mail addresses were refusing all mail.

Only one company seemed to offer any kind of international services at all; L'Express Des Iles, which, as you can infer from their name, are based in the French overseas department of Guadeloupe.

Which, as a French overseas department, doesn't count for country-counting purposes. They do, however, serve Saint Lucia, which helped. The only problem with them was that for reasons we couldn't ascertain, no ferries were operating at all during our second planned week there, which meant if we wanted to take their routes, we'd have to spend less time in Saint Lucia than Laura would have liked.

Although plenty of ferries exist domestically, especially within larger groups like The Grenadines, the reason there are so few international ferry services is geographic. Stiff breezes with rough waves, occasional hurricanes, infrastructure issues, and a low population (Saint Lucia's population is around 178,000 which makes it one of the larger ones) means that demand for international ferry services is surprisingly low. A couple of companies have apparently tried in the past to connect more islands, but they've never been profitable. Interestingly, while there's a decent air network covered by several operators, there's no low-cost options so the price per km is relatively high – not that the boats themselves are cheap; both of ours were around €79 one way; but flights would have been a shade less than double that.

So. Given that, as I say, Saint Lucia was a non-negotiable, the question was – should we head South or North. Going South would take us to the remote tropical beaches of St Vincent & the Grenadines, and the quite picturesque-sounding island of Grenada, though it would have to be done by some short flights in potentially very small aeroplanes, while going North would take us to the French outpost of Martinique and the lesser-attested island of Dominica, not to be confused with Dominican Republic. This could be done by ferry, but Martinique wasn't exactly enticing,

In the end what swung it was a combination of cost, logistics, and weather. We were going in early June, which is kind of the very back end of the tourist season. This is because officially the hurricane season starts on 1 June. Obviously the natural world doesn't care about arbitrary dates created by human culture, but we'd be there for two weeks and obviously the later in the trip we got, the more likely hurricanes would be to form. Previous hurricanes had affected the south much more than the north – indeed a couple of islands in the Grenadines were still nowhere near recovered from ones that hit in 2021-2022. Laura's aversion to flights, especially on small planes in bad weather, meant she'd rather take the ferry – for reasons of cost and convenience our trip would end in Barbados, because there was a direct flight from there back to London, but getting there would involve one flight from wherever we ended up, so we decided one regional flight was enough and we should head North.

The actual trip wasn't as expensive as I'd feared, in the sense I was expecting tropical beach destinations to have tropical beach prices, and in the main they didn't – I mean it's obviously not as budgety as somewhere like the tropical beaches of Philippines or Thailand, but equally hotel and food prices weren't going to break your bank if you were coming from a generically expensive country. The public transport options weren't frequent or regular, but (aside from a couple of instances, as you'll hear) they did exist, and it's definitely possible to go most places using local buses. It just takes a bit of planning. And avoid trying to travel on Sundays and Bank Holidays completely, though that's not astoundingly different from much of the UK to be honest.

With regard to accommodation, as in a few other places we've travelled, the trickiest issue we had was finding twin-bedded rooms. When I browsed on a notable hotel booking site (not saying which one, but I've already said it), there were many many options for our dates in Saint Lucia and Dominica, until I specified twin rooms. Saint Lucia dropped to about five or six across the entire island for the bulk of our stay, and for our one night in the city of Castries specifically, the only two places that were either convenient or budgetary had ratings that even the Britannia Hotel chain in the UK would have sneered at. In Dominica absolutely nothing came up at

all in Roseau and all our options were a bit remote. This ended up being a good thing, but it wasn't my intention.

Laura would absolutely have been best off going with a lover rather than a bestie. People have joked that we should just get married out of the sheer convenience for this sort of thing, missing the point that we'd still need twin beds. I would do anything for love but I won't do that.

Our expectations for the trip weren't extensive – indeed one of our fears was that we'd not have that much to do. We very much had it down as a trip to chill out rather than be active, it was just a case of wondering if we'd get \*too\* chill and kind of feel it a bit of a waste. Certainly when I was plotting the trip, I'd made a note of pretty much everything there was to do on everywhere south of Dominica, and it wasn't a terribly long list. But on the other hand, as long as there were beaches, and as long as there was rum, everything else would be a bonus. Right?

*{section separation jingle}*

I have little memory of my journey to the Caribbean. I can tell you we flew out of London Gatwick, which meant I had to come down the afternoon before and take a long train journey to the obscurely-named town of Salfords, not to be confused with Salford, which is a different place entirely, although they both mean 'ford by the willow trees'. Salfords is in Surrey, so is quite well-to-do, though I got there late enough that the gastropub attached to the slightly small and less-well-endowed Premier Inn had stopped serving food for the evening; waiting several minutes to check-in as the receptionist was in a different timezone wasn't an issue. My room was on the ground floor, which doesn't happen very often, and looked out onto a narrow section of grass and a fence, which is underwhelming but infinitely more aesthetic than usual; I often post to my YouTube Stories about my views from hotel windows and they're exactly as you'd expect from budget travel.

I met Laura in the check-in queue at the airport the next morning; she likes to get to airports early so I grudgingly eased out of bed and took the bus rather than walked. We eventually made our way to the Wetherspoons because there's nothing like a Wetherspoons breakfast, especially at an airport, and it ensured Laura could lubricate her mind to face the horrors of the next few hours in the air. Airports are very liminal places, both in time and space, so my usual rules of 'no beer before midday' don't apply. I also took the opportunity to draw out some more cash from an ATM; I already had a couple of hundred pounds but I'd procrastinated on obtaining US\$; the ATM in Gatwick dispensed dollars directly, so even at a ridiculously poor exchange rate I still felt it was useful. Spoiler alert: it became even more useful than I'd intended.

Nine hours in the air, in a noticeably half-empty plane, and we were in Saint Lucia – country 97 for me and not a place I'd've expected to visit. It took a while to get in – we were one of the last to leave the plane in the first place and then we got held up at the immigration desks because the border guard requested information about where we were staying, and didn't quite seem to understand the concept of 'yeh it's not a hotel it's someone's flat, no it doesn't have a specific name, no we communicated through e-mail why would I know their telephone number'. This was not helped by the airport not having Wi-Fi so getting access to the information they required wasn't quick or easy. Tip for travellers, make sure you have every single possible relevant information related to your accommodation, not just the booking confirmation and the address.

We were eventually allowed to enter the country, and we had time to kill so we took a walk to the condo. The road does a curve alongside the airport, turning back on itself the far side of the runway, and goes for a mile or two with the airport on one side and the sea on the other. You'd've thought this would make it a really nice and aesthetic beachy setting to amble, watching planes land on one side and the wind shaking the palm trees on the other.

Listener, it was not. Now I'm not saying it was grim or anything, but not many flights service the airport, especially slightly off-season, so the runway felt a bit dead with only our plane (headed on elsewhere – Trinidad maybe – certainly quite a few people stayed on board when we alighted), while on the other side there was sand, but it was quite narrow, felt quite forlorn, and covered with sargassum and palm fronds. It felt quite bleak, as beaches go, and not really that enticing. Possibly not what you might have expected from somewhere like Saint Lucia, but conversely, we were only an hour in and we had a whole island to explore.

Our accommodation for two nights was on the upper floor of a small apartment block on a side-street in the

town of Vieux Fort. The apartment itself was fine; roof terrace, little balcony, aircon to freeze your fingers off, a shower that worked fine; it's just that Vieux Fort is a largely functional area and not ... it's not pretty, let's be honest. It's a bit light grey and scruffy, with very cuboid buildings and unkempt streets. It's where people live, not where people go. It's also apparently got the highest crime rate in Saint Lucia, but we never saw any of that. What we did see was the inside of a KFC, because it was close by, it was open, and we were tired so it was easy. We did have problems paying for it because my card kept being refused, but I figured that would be a problem for Future Nel; we paid in cash in US Dollars instead as it seems they're accepted across much of the country at a fixed exchange rate, while I'd paid for the accommodation, weirdly, in British Pounds for no reason other than I could. Again, this proved to be a good idea with hindsight. Our first night saw comfortably long sleep, despite the incredibly loud music being played from a bar just below our rooms, although even being Saturday it stopped seemingly unexpectedly early around 9.15pm.

As we'd find out, Saint Lucia doesn't do late nights.

*{section separation jingle}*

The reason I'd booked two nights in the Vieux Fort area was because it seemed a sizeable enough place, and convenient for the airport. The main international airport in Saint Lucia isn't really anywhere near anything you might deem 'touristy', due to the topography of the island. In fact this is something common to many islands in the region - they're small and mountainous, so there's very little flat land to build on. The settlements tend to be on the western sides where building towns is easier and more useful, but the prevailing winds mean the airports are much better located on the eastern sides where the weather's a bit calmer. Therefore there's often only really one or two spots on the islands you can put an airport, and they're rarely anywhere near the main towns. In the case of Saint Lucia, we just wanted somewhere easy to flop into on our first night, and we didn't want to pay for a taxi to take us halfway across the island on a Sunday, so it made sense to stick by the airport until the working week started with more frequent and reliable buses.

This did mean our introduction to the island wasn't exactly picture-perfect, and our wander along the beaches we'd passed the previous day did nothing to change that feeling. As I say, it wasn't that they were bad; they weren't the litter-strewn, polluted, run-down beaches you might find in parts of England, but they were mostly very soft sand, slightly undulating, and covered with nature. They also weren't terribly wide. The sea itself was a bit wavy too, so while nice enough to walk along in passing, they definitely weren't the sort of places you'd sit down on and spend a while. Notably others must have felt the same way historically; on this stretch there were very few cafes, no accommodations, and it felt a little deserted.

We wandered past someone doing some building work on his shop, and had a little bit of a chat with him. He suggested we take a bus to the nearby village of Laborie, and even drove us to where the main bus stop was - a very short walk from our accommodation. He promoted it by saying in the week he runs tours for tourists there, but that today was his day off; quite refreshing to come across the opposite of a tour tout. We did query the existence of the bus, it being Sunday, but he assured us it would just mean fewer of them. We were at the bus stop for a little while, but in fairness we weren't alone so that gave us a bit of hope. And for sure, a minibus turned up and we were directed towards it.

I say minibus. It was more like one of those large taxis or small vans that schools use to take groups on trips. There was no number or direction board on the front - the driver just shouted his destination, which does require paying attention when you're waiting as it would be easy to miss. And of course there's no timetables. Unlike other parts of the world, there was no waiting around until it was full, it just loaded up with a handful of people and then launched off. We paid on-board, with cash, once we'd sat down.

We were the only people going to Laborie. The village is at sea-level down a steep hill, while the main road keeps to the clifftops, but even so he dropped us off in the village itself - I got the impression if we hadn't been going there he would have just driven straight along the main road and avoided the village entirely.

Laborie is a very small place; pretty much just two roads parallel to the shorefront and several small streets cutting across making a grid pattern. The roads were lined with colourful and varied buildings, and the beach, while quite narrow, definitely had the much more Caribbean vibes, with palm trees, shorefront chalets, and fishing boats. There was also a pier, at the start of which people were selling fresh fish. Aside from there, it was very quiet; a few people hanging outside one of the bars, and the occasional car passing through, but that was

all.1

It being a Sunday, not a lot was open, but we did find a place for a small lunch; grilled pork and fish with plantain. It evidently caters to tourists in the high season, being one of those places whose walls are decorated with flags, banners, posters, and trinkets related to the island, that were available to buy.

Now, as it turned out, there's apparently no buses back from Laborie on a Sunday afternoon. Well, there may have been from up the hill, but not that come down into the village itself. We ended up paying the café owner to give us a lift back to Vieux Fort – it's not far, only maybe 15 minutes down the road, but leaving aside the hill, the main road didn't have a pavement, merely a wide grassy verge and some sharp hidden bends, so we felt a taxi was the safer choice. But that that was an option, coupled with the chap giving us a lift to the outward bus stop in the first place, suggested to us Saint Lucia seems to be full of very friendly people. This would become a theme.

Back in Vieux Fort we popped into the supermarket and bought some very unripe mangos. We didn't know how unripe they were until we tried eating them. I also tried to withdraw money from an ATM but the first one didn't accept foreign bank cards and the second one didn't accept mine in particular. Once again, Present Nel pushed this problem onto Future Nel.

*{section separation jingle}*

*Me: Hello :) It's time for a mid-episode break. Half time. Seventh Innings Stretch. That sort of thing. Put the kettle on. Grab a snack. Get comfortable. I'm just here to remind you ways in which you can get in touch and help this podcast out. You probably know this already, but in case you don't:*

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*Now, on with the show!*

*{section separation jingle}*

Our next stop was Soufriere, a small town on the west coast, about an hour from Vieux Fort along the windy road that passes Laborie, and which would be our home for the next three nights. Note the names here: Vieux Fort, Laborie, Soufriere, Castries. Saint Lucia used to be a French colony and when the British finally wrested control at the end of the Napoleonic War, they kept the placenames.

Soufriere has long been a town of significance on Saint Lucia – indeed during the days of French rule, Soufriere was the capital of the colony. When the British took over they moved the administration to Castries, in the north of the island. It's a grid pattern of very vibrant buildings of various colours, mostly two storey with many a fancy balcony to be seen. Its surrounded by lush forested hills, and looking down at the town from them reveals it's, to use a phrase so hated by travel writers for at least two decades, nestled quaintly between the bottom of the hills and a wide, sweeping, crater-like bay. It's a very aesthetic place to wile away a bit of time.

Saint Lucia's flag, in case you've not seen it (and to be honest it's not one you'd come across that often), is quite distinctive – three stacked triangles on a sky-blue background. The triangles (a small gold one superimposed on a much larger black one with a white outline) represent the two mountains – Petit Piton and Gros Piton – that are visible from Soufriere (well, Petit Piton is nearer and blocks most of the view of Gros Piton). Apparently you can climb them but they're quite technical and also, so humid, you'd be a sweaty mess by the end; we did not. But these two mountains are very much used as a symbol of the country, to the extent

that even the local lager is brewed using the Piton name.

And yes, I did sit at a beachfront bar holding a bottle of Piton beer with the view of Petit Piton in the background. Because I'm cheesy like that. The beer itself was mid, the setting definitely wasn't.

Now, that's not to say the beach was one of those pristine tropical beaches that Saint Lucia is famous for. Despite intentions beforehand, we did not go to the best beaches on the island. In many tropical destinations (like Jamaica), the best beaches are gatekept in resorts. This isn't quite true here; all the beaches are public access; however the problem is getting to them. What are reputed to be the best beaches on the island, Anse Chastanet and Anse Mamin, are three miles from Soufriere but only accessible either down a very undulating and narrow gravelly road followed by a little walk beyond one of the resort hotels – a journey not conducive by foot even without the heat and humidity – or, a taxi tour boat from Soufriere Pier. The boat would cost about \$70 USD; we were quoted a taxi along the road for \$50 USD. Both of these are horrendous for a 3 mile journey, and opens the question of 'well, all the beaches are public access' but are they, are they really, or is that just one of those 'letter of the law but not the spirit of the law' moments. So instead we mostly went to one at the town centre. It was nice enough, even if the waves were a bit strong and the ground fell steeply, giving not much scope for the non-swimmer in me to do more than stay at the very edge. Laura had a few dips, and even found a pair of sunglasses on one swim, which was just as well as she'd recently lost a pair. Other tourists, and there were a handful of them, chose to hire speedboats or similar, and go snorkelling further out to sea. Clearly I did not do that either; I just sat on a towel and listened to podcasts. It's rare I switch off for long enough to do that.

It was noticeable that there were only a handful of tourists though. The hotel we were staying in (La Villa des Pitons) was on the road heading north out of town, partway up a very steep hill, although not as far up the hill as Booking Dot Com had indicated. It's built directly on the side of the hill, and blends in to the forested slopes as it's predominantly painted green. It has several floors, though most of them not that large, and getting around it felt quite like a rabbit warren. With the exception that much of it is open to the elements, or at least it's very 'airy', with the main floor containing the reception and dining area cosplaying as a huge balcony. The view from the balcony edge is stunning, as it looks out over the nearby trees so you get a sweeping vista of the rainforest, the colourful town below, the sea, and of course a direct view of the Pitons. Indeed we had a similar view from our room, which was built on two levels – downstairs was the bathroom and a small kitchen and dining area, while upstairs in a kind of mezzanine were two large beds. The wall facing away from the hillside was basically just window so we had a great view without even needing to leave the room.

During the height of the cruise season, the hotel gets absolutely rammed and both that large restaurant area, and the lido a couple of stairwells away up the hill, are very popular. On our visit we were only the guests, the kitchen was closed, and the pool was scattered with fallen leaves. In addition, their card machine wasn't working, and they didn't accept Paypal payments. We'll come onto that shortly. That said, the owners of the hotel did also run a restaurant (Michael's @ Jen Mwen) in the centre of town, very close to the pier, where we could also pay the hotel bill, so we made sure we paid them a visit or two.

In fact the owners of the hotel fell over themselves to make us feel welcome. This included one free shot of local rum (Bounty) each and discounted food at their restaurant, and a couple of free car rides. The restaurant itself was pretty nice; we had a lovely meal of curried chicken with a whole host of sides on our first full day, which we ate on the balcony overlooking the seafront. The walls were decorated with messages from previous visitors – it's definitely a popular place.

We ate quite well in Soufriere, including a very nice stew from a town centre bar/cafe, staffed with slightly sullen dinnerladies. We also had like a kind of barbecued chicken there another night. There was also a slightly upmarket bar restaurant in the town centre where we had some lovely cocktails. In fact the only problem we had with the food here was, well, finding it in the first place. Once the sun went down, the shutters tended to come up, and finding anywhere that was open and serving food even past 7pm proved quite problematic. Evidently lunch is a more important meal of the day here than the evening meal. In addition, the bars on the beach didn't have consistent opening hours; one of them – a large hexagonal beach hut with stools at the bar – was open some, but not all, of the days we were there (and we were there midweek; this wasn't a Sunday thing). It was all slightly confusing.

Aside from drinking beer on the beach, and wandering the streets taking photographs of the pretty buildings,

and being followed by a very friendly street dog who seemed to think I was some kind of guru – at one point it even followed us up to the hotel – we didn't do much, but then we didn't really expect to. Rainforest hiking wasn't on our hit-list and the Pitons are, to be fair, quite steep. One thing we did do though was visit a sulphur spring spa site.

Like many of the islands in this part of the Caribbean, Saint Lucia is very volcanic, and actively so. Indeed two famous volcanic eruptions within living memory occurred on the islands of Martinique (the next island to the north) and Montserrat (just north of Guadeloupe), both of which caused huge devastation. So there's a lot of places where mineral-rich hot water can be reached & tapped, and on Saint Lucia, just south of Soufriere and near the Pitons, a small open-air spa resort has been set up to take advantage of the mineral-rich hot water that runs off the volcanoes.

It's set directly on the slopes of the volcano so everything feels quite rocky and barren around. It's quite touristy, noticeably so, and if memory serves it costs about \$12 USD to enter. You can pay a bit extra and take a tour to the crater, but we did not. The spa area itself is all in the open air, and on our visit there were a couple of very short but quite heavy sudden rain showers, but if you're in the pools anyway you're already wet so it's no big deal. There's in fact several pools to sit/walk around in, and there's no real difference between them; it's just a better vibe to have a series of smaller pools rather than one big one, I suppose. Pretty much all the pools were the same depth - 4' / 1.2m - with stone-carved benches in the water so you could sit down & be submerged to your chest. The temperature of most of the pools were around 100°F / 38°C, and the list of regulations suggested not spending more than 10 minutes in the water.

There's also a covered shelter to store your bags, clothes, etc, three or four wooden shacks that serve as changing rooms, and open-air showers behind the shacks. There's also several staff on-hand to look after you and, if you want, cover you in clay that acts as an exfoliant/scrub, so when you go back into the water, you get all nicely zingy and smooth. And yes, the area did smell faintly of sulphur but honestly, not strong enough for you to really notice and distract you. Though my swimwear (lycra daisy-motif crop-top and leggings I'd normally wear for running) took a couple of washes back home to get all the aroma out.

On our visit it was bustling but not that full – there were quite a few people milling around but there never seemed to be more than a couple of people in each pool at any one time. Occasionally a minibus-load of people would wander in, but you could tell they were all on a tour as it was clear from the conversations they were having that they couldn't stay very long. Conversely, we must have been there for maybe an hour and a half.

Our walk back to the main road, via a coconut, took us past some rainforest with views out towards the nearby hills, covered with foliage. Laura said it felt a bit Jurassic – what she imagined the world would have looked like while the dinosaurs were dominant. It was definitely a pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

One final point about Soufriere. For those of you Brits of my age, you may recall a mid-80s movie called 'Water', a mildly satirical comedy about a Caribbean island wanting independence – it had Michael Caine and Billy Connolly in it, as well as cameos by two Beatles and Eric Clapton. Anyway. Most of the on-location shots were filmed here, and when I mentioned it to the hotel owner who gave us a lift up to the sulphur springs, he said that not only did he remember it all being shot, but he even managed to get Michael Caine's autograph. Despite it being one of those movies I watched on repeat back when I was young enough to do that sort of thing (I guess I'd've been about 13 or 14 at the time), I have to say I didn't immediately recognise it, though perhaps because it's been so long since I saw the movie I've kind of forgotten some of the background scenery.

As for Past Nel's issues with their bank card not being accepted in places you'd've expected it to be accepted in: you can tell it's an issue when I, me, actively choose to make a phone call, especially one from abroad. It turns out that someone had tried to use my card in, of all places, Brazil, so my bank had cancelled it. In addition, my bank said because they'd cancelled it, they couldn't switch it back on, for security reasons, and I'd need a new card sent out. Which is not terribly helpful when you're 4,000 miles away and only have one bank card. I was slightly irked. In this particular instance I was okay because Laura's cards still worked, and the nature of the way we travel together means one of us pays for flights and the other pays for hotels and everything else and we sort it all out at the end – usually this means one of us owes the other about £70 – but imagine what would have been the situation had I been travelling solo, and three days into a two-week holiday where I had only a fistful of dollars and my flight back was on a completely different island. That would have probably been a large rant

on Twitter and a tale picked up by the Metro newspaper.

*{section separation jingle}*

Our last day in Saint Lucia was spent getting further up the coast to the city of Castries, from where we'd take an early morning ferry the next day. We wandered over to the bus station and lurked around for about 10 minutes for the next minibus ... but instead we ended up in someone's car. The hotel owner was headed up that way himself anyway, and popped by the bus station to see if we were waiting. We were quite surprised to see him, and again shows the level of attentiveness the hotel had.

He was going up for a small business meeting in the resort town of Rodney Bay. This is at completely the opposite end of the country to the international airport, on the far side of Castries even, and takes over an hour and a half from Soufriere along the winding and undulating main road, but it's where most of the tourists go. It feels a world away from the likes of Fort Vieux, with well-to-do restaurants, a large marina full of yachts, and much cleaner, brighter, and wider streets. I'm sure someone with a degree in cultural studies or social history could probably write a book as to why this is; I really can't imagine. We had a wander and an ice-cream while he had what he said was a casual regular chat with the Deputy Prime Minister or someone of that ilk. He then dropped us off at our accommodation – the adapted front room of someone's house on a residential street in northern Castries, and it turns out he knew the owner of that too. Evidently in a country that small, if you're in any way influential, you get to know most people quite well.

Left to our own devices, we had a wander around Castries. It's a lot more, I don't know, gritty?, maybe than Soufriere; very busy, not a lot to see and do, with mostly unaesthetic buildings, not as dour as Fort Vieux but certainly not a place you'd imagine lingering long as a tourist. Might explain why we had trouble sourcing accommodation – people who don't live here use it purely as a stopover, and if you \*are\* a tourist why would you stay here when Rodney Bay is like 10 miles up the road. As tropical paradises go, this isn't one, but then that's not what we were there for anyway. Well, it's not what I was there for. Anyway, because it was recommended to us by our host, we grabbed fried chicken from a street stall so large Laura couldn't see over the counter. To be fair, it was pretty good, and oh my there was a lot of it.

We had quite a nice night, though we did have to be up uncomfortably early. The sun had just risen and the pavements were covered in a light coating of rain. The walk to the ferry terminal went alongside the port area – definitely not the seaview you'd want from the Caribbean – and despite the early hour the terminal was quite busy; that said much of the crowd was made up of what seemed to be a primary school trip. It feels weird to know that schools can just take a field trip to another country; mine could just about manage Wales, which doesn't count. And you'd have no chance if you grew up in Luton.

*{section separation jingle}*

And so to France. Which is a quite bizarre thing to say when you're in the Caribbean, but there we are. Martinique is an overseas department and region of France, which makes it legally and administratively as French as Marseille, with the slight exception that even though it's in the European Union and it does use the Euro, it's not in the Schengen Area. This may be something non-EU citizens need to know.

It was a comfortable ferry ride, about two hours, and to be honest I dozed for much of the journey. I don't recall any issues getting in, and as the ferry terminal is right in the centre of the main city – Fort-de-France – we were very quickly in the town and wandering around.

We only had two nights in Martinique, just over two full days, purely and simply because our flight from Dominica to Barbados was on the following Thursday and the way the ferries were scheduled meant if we didn't, we'd've had two extra days in Dominica and when we were planning the trip we felt that would have been too long there. In any case, there at least seemed to be things to do in Martinique, and since everything was centred around Fort-de-France, it'd be an easy way to spend two days. Ah, hindsight is a marvellous affliction.

The town itself is actually quite nice. It doesn't have quite the charm of Soufriere, being a lot bigger and a lot more functional, but the centre is full of relatively pretty streets and ornate buildings, many with lots of colour. One of the most notable is the Cathedral St Louis, a slightly odd-looking square-panelled building with a large

iron steeple and framework that's the seventh iteration of the cathedral in less than 400 years, because Martinique isn't the most environmentally stable place in the world. The nearby Bibliothèque Schoelcher, one of the first buildings we saw when we left the ferry terminal, was designed in the same way by the same architect (Pierre-Henri Picq), and, to be honest, defies categorisation, being a whole mix of styles and colours, complete with a curved pyramid glass dome.

In principle it's quite an easy city to get around too; our hotel was a standard issue budget type hotel three or four miles towards the airport and right next to a large out-of-town shopping centre, but there were regular buses that plied the route, taking about twenty minutes. I say 'buses', they were in fact more akin to rail-less trams in style and effect, mostly riding on their own dedicated busway and only stopping at specific bus stops which had platforms. Our main issue with them was working out how to buy a ticket – there wasn't a machine at the stops, and the devices on board didn't seem to be working at all. On our first trip we got off partway just to check it wasn't just a feature of where we boarded, but a quick chat with a couple of locals going the other way revealed that not only was nothing working so effectively the buses were free, but they seemed very confused that we'd even asked the question. The website for the local transport authority very much told us travel wasn't free, and which tickets we needed to be buying, so evidently this was a long-standing technical issue rather than a radical transportation policy decision.

We mostly ate at or from the nearby shopping centre. It was a pretty big place, and it itself contained a large branch of the French supermarket chain E.Leclerc. And much of the produce sold was made, brewed, produced, in France – including their large beer selection. It did mean we got the opportunity to have some decent cheese and bread, at French prices, natch – though surprisingly not excessively so, given they'd have to add shipping costs onto everything. Also, on our first night we ate in a slightly dodgy pizzeria close by the supermarket; while the pizza was mid, the local rum they had - Maison La Maunay – was very nice, and also the only time I can remember ever having rum that was as transparent as vodka.

We were in that hotel because, once again, finding twin-bedded rooms had been an issue. This was one of only about two or three options in the entire Fort-de-France metro area that were available, regardless of budget, and the others were AirBnBs in obscure parts of the outer city that might have been trickier to get to. It was a decent enough hotel though – and they were more than happy to forward on a package given to us to transport across international lines by our hotel in Soufriere.

I'd love to say this sounds like some kind of clandestine affair, akin to when someone in a suit in a suspiciously quiet restaurant says they're in the import/export business and doesn't clarify. In truth it was much more mundane, if a little odd. A previous visitor to the hotel in Soufriere lived in Guadeloupe, and had left something behind – earrings I think, or some kind of jewellery anyway – and when we'd told the hotel we were headed to Martinique, they contacted her to ask if that was of any use to her. And apparently it was. We had initially suggested we'd post it once we arrived, because domestic mail rates, but as it turns out we didn't get to a post office so we asked our hotel in Martinique if they could hold on to it until she could pop over from Guadeloupe and collect it in person. And everyone was more than happy to do this. The package was in a plain brown envelope, yes. But I know it was legit because I saw our hotelier wrap it in front of my very eyes.

That was the most exciting thing that happened while we were in Martinique. Not only was our visit over a weekend, it coincided with a designated holiday (Pentecost) on the following Monday, so pretty much everything was closed for much of our time there and even most of the local buses and ferries had stopped running by Saturday lunchtime. We couldn't even get to one of the historical sites we'd planned in to visit, a local slavery museum, because it's up a hill in the forest on the other side of the bay to Fort-de-France, so without buses and ferries our only option would have been a 23km long and expensive taxi each way around the bay. Sunday was particularly quiet – even the shopping centre was closed – and while the buses to/from the airport were still running it was a much reduced service. The city centre of Fort-de-France was very quiet and the only place to buy food seemed to be the McDonalds. Which, as this is France, doesn't even count for Laura's 'visit a Maccy Ds in every country she visits' list. Even the street stalls in the green by the seafront were shuttered.

About the only thing we did do over our time there was visit a local history museum, and honestly we really only did that because we were passing it, it was open, and they had aircon. This was the Musée d'Archéologie et de Préhistoire de la Martinique, and it depicted all manner of things to do with pre-colonial life on Martinique; who the people were, where they lived, how they lived, and what they did, including things like

fashion and wedding practices. Everything was in French, I must say, but Laura's pretty good in general and I'm okay at reading it, so we got through fine. It was a couple of floors and we wandered slowly through it, taking maybe an hour.

What didn't help was the weather. I don't know if it's because Fort-de-France was the biggest town we'd been to on the trip, and whether or not there being more concrete and cement and tarmac affected things, or whether it was the lack of a refreshing breeze from the sea, or something else, but Martinique felt hot. It wasn't really any hotter than Saint Lucia had been, but it just felt a lot more oppressive and sultry. Maybe it was a reflection of mood. English Lit majors take note. It just meant on the Sunday we had a lot of sitting about on park benches trying to stay in the shade, waiting for our afternoon ferry to Dominica.

Hopefully Dominica would be more interesting.

*{end pod jingle}*

Well, you'll find out if it was, next time on Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. Until then, don't argue with a pizzeria owner about being shafted €15, it's not worth the hassle, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

*Outro voiceover:*

*Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, tell your friends that I rocked your socks. If you wear socks when listening to my pod; that's your call not mine. And don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.*

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*Show-notes are available on my website: [barefoot-backpacker.com](http://barefoot-backpacker.com).*

*Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}*