

DOMINICA AT ITS WILDEST

UNTAMED, UNSPOILED, AND YOURS ALONE

By Nick Heil

KOOL & THE GANG'S "Jungle Boogie" was stuck in my head. I was scrambling up a near-vertical trail drenched by a tropical deluge, making my way back from Dominica's Boiling Lake, a fizzing 31,000-square-foot sulfuric cauldron. The monsoon had arrived early in the southern Caribbean, and I was worried it would put the kibosh on my island adventure—particularly the rugged six-hour round-trip to the lake, in Morne Trois Pitons National Park, a route vulnerable to floods and mudslides.

"What do you do if it rains?" I had asked my guide, Ali Auguiste, a young, cheery Carib, when he came to pick me up for the hike. Outside, the clouds were heavy and as gray as a gull's wing.

"Well, mistah," Ali had said, a brilliant white smile cracking across his face, "we get wet!"

Wet we got. First the rain fell in a sweet, saturat-

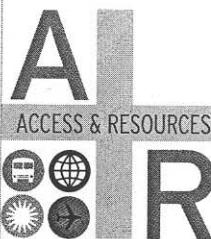
ing drizzle. Then it came at us in curtains. Finally, as we crested a high ridge, it stormed with such primordial intensity that it rained *up*, our ponchos snapping above our heads so that we looked like some strange overgrown flora moving eerily through the ferns.

By the time we were crabbing our way to the top of the flooded buttress, I had achieved trekking's equivalent of a runner's high—energized by the tough hike, thrilled by the meteorological action, and humming along to Kool & the Gang. When I reached the lip, runoff hosing my chest and pouring over my head, Ali stuck out his hand to help me over the edge. We were both grinning like schoolboys. This was hardly some manicured nature walk: It was as close to mountaineering as you can get in the Caribbean.

Sandwiched between Martinique, to the south, and Guadeloupe, to the north, Dominica (pronounced *Doh-mi-NEEK-a*) is the youngest island in the Lesser Antilles—a volcanic chile pepper of green thrusting out of the tourmaline sea. I had come chasing reports of unspoiled rainforest hiking, hidden hot springs, secluded beaches, world-class diving, and a holistic, enviro-friendly culture that was just beginning to get real adventure tourism off the ground. While 29-mile-long Dominica is home to 72,000 people (5,700 of whom are native Caribs), it's blissfully undeveloped. Thanks to the efforts of farsighted preservationists, Dominica has established more protected parks, forests, and marine reserves per capita than almost anywhere on the planet. As a result, hikers, bikers, and paddlers can explore 4,000-foot peaks, 128,500 acres of untrammled rainforest, more than 100 miles of trails, and 365 rivers—"One for every day of the year," locals like to enthuse.

After my Boiling Lake epic, I needed a day to convalesce in the Roseau Valley at the Papillote Wilderness Retreat, a botanical fantasyland about four miles from the capital, Roseau, on the southwestern coast. Though free of televisions, phones, and air conditioning, the rooms are comfortable, with arrestingly beautiful surroundings. Credit goes to Anne Baptiste, the expat owner and gardener from Florida, who visited Dominica in 1961 and was so enchanted with its horticultural splendor she spent the next 40 years creating this internationally recognized Eden.

"If you just stand still, you begin to realize how much is going on around you," she said, pausing on a footpath to deadhead a begonia. Surrounding us was a rainbow gallery of indigenous and exotic species, though it was



GETTING THERE::

Round-trip tickets to Dominica from New York or Los Angeles on American (800-433-7300, www.aa.com) start at about \$500.

WHERE TO STAY::

Doubles at Papillote Wilderness Retreat (767-448-2287, www.papillote.dm) cost \$95; suites, \$115–\$125. Add breakfast and dinner for \$35 per person per day. The Fort Young Hotel, perched on a bayfront bluff in Roseau, has 53 air-conditioned rooms and suites

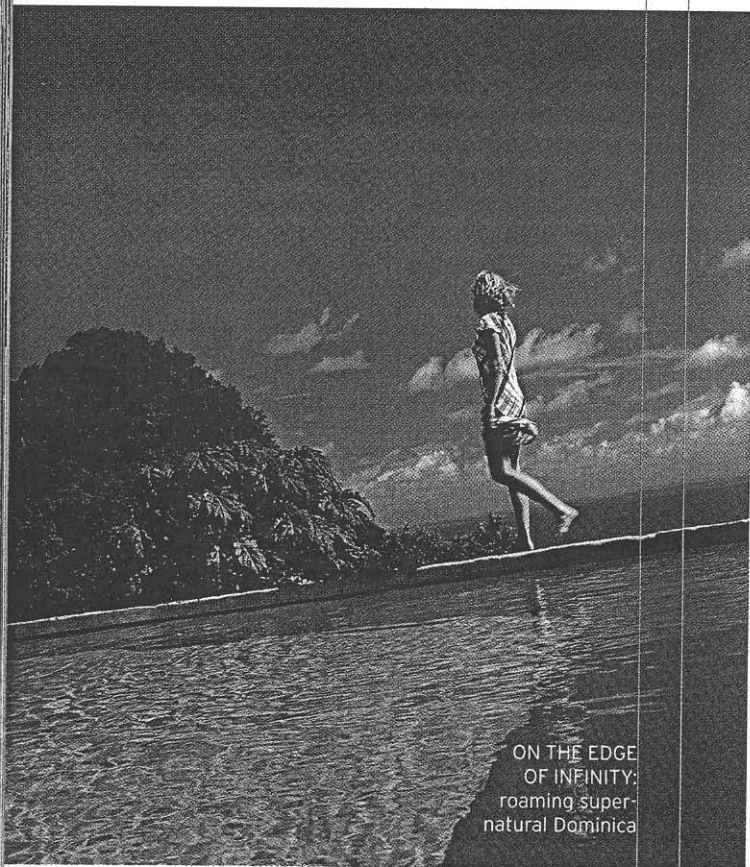
(doubles, \$95; oceanfront suites, \$230; 767-448-5000, www.fortyoung-hotel.com).

WHAT TO DO::

Guided hikes to Boiling Lake can be arranged through Ken's Hinterland Adventure Tours and Transfer Service (\$160 for up to four people; 767-448-4850, www.kenshinterlandtours.com), as can treks to Sari Sari, one of Dominica's most striking waterfalls (\$180 for up to four people). The friendly folks at Nature Island Dive, based in Soufrière, will set you up for a paddle and snorkel in the Soufrière-Scotts Head Marine Reserve, or arrange for a two-tank dive (\$70–\$80; 767-449-8181, www.natureislanddive.com).

RESOURCES::

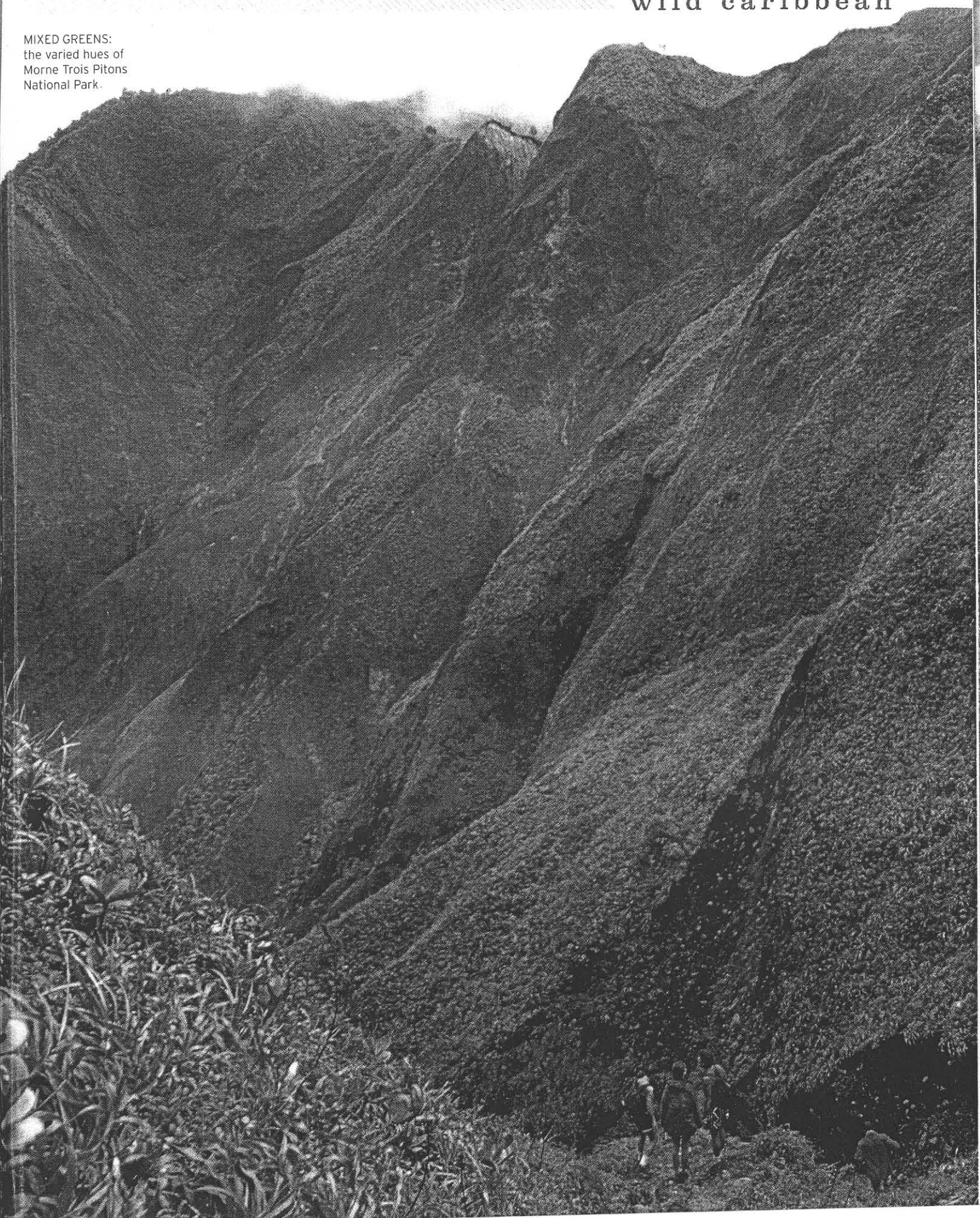
Dominica's tourist board in New York (718-261-9615, www.dominica.dm)



ON THE EDGE OF INFINITY: roaming supernatural Dominica

wild caribbean

MIXED GREENS:
the varied hues of
Morne Trois Pitons
National Park.





A DOUBLE DIP OF WELLNESS: plunging waterfall; below, fishermen's boats in Scotts Head Bay



only a tiny sample of the island's 1,200 species of flowering plants: glistening jade vines, cascading heliconia, ginger blossoms as big as your face, and, as Anne pointed out, an orchid smaller than your thumb, growing like spider silk on a tree branch.

That night, on the dining patio overlooking the lush valley, I was served prawns in garlic sauce, saffron rice, and rum punch made from guava juice. If Boiling Lake had shown me Dominica's rambunctious side, Papillote was the pastoral antithesis. This was the binary character I would encounter all over the island: tough and serene; wild and peaceful. I fell asleep thinking my deep thoughts while fireflies flashed through the open-air room.

From Papillote, I headed about ten miles down-coast to the quaint, pastel-colored fishing village of Soufrière, where I connected with Nature Island Dive for a few hours of kayaking and snorkeling above a dive site, Champagne—so named because geothermal vents in the sandy seafloor emit streams of warm bubbles. The all-but-beachless "Nature Island" tends to get overlooked as a fun-in-the-sun Caribbean destination, but here, drifting above parrotfish, sergeant majors, brain coral, barrel sponges, and countless other forms of showy reef life, I tasted one of its premier attractions.

Afterwards, I embarked on a whirlwind clockwise tour of the entire coast. The most luxurious lodging—the historic Fort Young Hotel—is on the waterfront in Roseau, as is the best shopping for locally made jewelry, woven baskets, and wood crafts. It was a different scene as I crossed the northern tip and headed down the eastern shore: rocky coastline gouged by secluded coves, rustic banana plantations, languid villages, and the occasional black-sand beach or rum shop.

It was far down this coast, in the island's southeast corner, that I saw Dominica's future: a nearly completed luxury spa called Jungle Bay Spa Resort, the brainchild of Samuel Raphael, an island native with a degree in international studies from American University, in Washington, D.C. This self-contained eco-resort tucked into a hillside overlooking the Atlantic will offer studios for yoga and Pilates, two restaurants, conference facilities, and 35 private cottages built from tropical hardwoods.

I knew the arrival of such a place would mean little to those up the coast—the domino klatches, the rastas, the matriarchs balancing laundry baskets on their heads—but for overworked, overstressed Americans seeking a double dip of wellness, here was the promised land. As we chatted, Sam told me that the human with the longest known life span, Elizabeth Israel—a.k.a. Ma Pampo—was Dominican. She lived on this life-giving island for 128 years and died in 2003. *Stand still and you begin to realize how much is going on around you.* I stood as still as possible but couldn't begin to fathom it all. ○