

Change in motion

New community tourism initiatives in Saint Lucia offer clients a way to support small businesses, finds **Alice Barnes-Brown**

mash, scrape, sweat – the process of turning roasted cocoa beans into chocolate has changed little since Saint Lucia's Howelton Estate was founded in 1896. As I pound the beans to oblivion, kindly guide Juliana shows me the callouses on her hands from years of doing this same repetitive action.

Visiting an independent producer like the Howelton Estate offers a closer look at the island's long-standing chocolate industry – and means your clients' cash supports local suppliers. It's just one of the community-led initiatives that is transforming the face of Saint Lucia's tourism scene for the better.

FREE FLOW

The island's government has been investing in small-scale projects, setting up a dedicated Community Tourism Agency in 2022 to

partner with the Saint Lucia Tourism Authority and provide funding and training to local tourism professionals. An agent booking platform is due to be rolled out from October.

One early success of the scheme is local operator Pelican Tours (pelicantoursslu.com), which launched in January in the fishing village of Anse La Raye. Snuggled between single-storey homes painted in the sky blue, yellow and black of Saint Lucia's flag, Pelican Tours' base is easily distinguished by the neat rows of kayaks and e-bikes outside.

We're met by charismatic young founder Amy Stephen. Today's mission is an e-bike ride along jungle tracks to reach the Venus Waterfall. As we practise our pedalling in the village's sleepy churchyard, Amy sets an enthusiastic tone: "We've lived in Anse La Raye all our lives, and we're so excited to show you some things you wouldn't see otherwise," she says. ➤

DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | SAINT LUCIA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: NewFlower Regenerative Garden; Howelton Estate; guide Juliana displays fresh cacao pods in the open-air studio; Anse La Raye beach

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Simon Dannhauer; Alice Barnes-Brown; Howelton Estate



We cycle past the primary school – which all the current Pelican Tours guides once attended – and give a friendly wave to villagers sitting on their doorsteps. When the buildings thin out into banana plantations and mountain streams, I spy coconut crabs scurrying at the roadside, munching on husks fallen from trees. Group sizes at Pelican Tours are limited to eight, so it feels more like hanging out with friends than being on an organised tour.

After zipping over bridges, up hills and around tight bends, we reach the last leg – a 10-minute trek to the falls. I inhale deeply, bamboo towering overhead, to breathe in the rainforest air, which is like tonic to the lungs after an exhilarating e-bike ride. Bright, spiny bird of paradise flowers add a splash of colour to the undergrowth, while tilapia fish mill idly in the turquoise pool of the waterfall.

"This is a microcosm of what our rainforest looks like," Amy explains. "It's important for us to be part of the conversation about keeping our waterfall clean."

She has been doing beach clean-ups in Anse La Raye since childhood, while her Pelican Tours colleagues have been working on a coral restoration project with plans to ensure tourists and locals alike can get involved with conservation.

FARM FOR THE FUTURE

Whooshing back to Anse La Raye, the faint, sweet aroma of cinnamon carries on the breeze. We follow it to NewFlower Regenerative Garden, where Damian and Ratoya Adjodha cultivate a peaceful patch filled with tropical flora. They grow produce for a few luxury resorts in Saint Lucia; Damian works as the horticultural manager at five-star Jade Mountain, while Ratoya leads the I-tal Rastafarian culinary experience at BodyHoliday.

Damian says: "We're all about syntropic agroforestry, which means understanding how ecosystems adapt and change and planning accordingly."

Light drops of rain bless the valley as we explore this veritable garden of Eden. Damian explains that the

land served as a crop garden for slaves working on the Anse La Raye sugar plantation, before it was bought by his great-grandfather.

Damian's eyes are firmly fixed on what's next. The couple aims to open the garden to visitors and host retreats, art workshops and overnight guests, creating a new sustainable destination in the heart of the island.

Saint Lucia might attract clients for its plush hotels and sandy beaches, but I leave wanting to experience more of its rainforest-filled interior – and to see how the next generation of tourism entrepreneurs will sow the seeds of the past to grow a more sustainable future. **TW**

BOOK IT

Gold Medal offers a seven-night all-inclusive stay at the Bay Gardens Beach Resort from £2,599 per person, based on two sharing a Deluxe Garden View room. Includes transfers and flights departing Gatwick on November 3. goldmedal.co.uk

WHERE TO stay



Bay Gardens Beach Resort

This 78-room resort in Rodney Bay is locally owned, serving up a taste of Saint Lucia with its generous portions of macaroni pie and steel pan music. A doughnut-shaped pool acts as the central hub, but the USP is unlimited access to the Splash Island Water Park, a floating obstacle course. Food is served at beachfront Sea Grapes and Hi-Tide restaurants, and all-inclusive guests can eat out in nearby restaurants.

baygardensresorts.com

ASK THE expert

"The Community Tourism Agency's booking platform makes it easy for agents to connect clients with authentic experiences. Simply browse experiences, book online and earn commission on every completed sale. These experiences add depth and offer something truly distinctive, while embracing the shift towards more meaningful, sustainable travel."

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