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SundayTravel WINTER GETAWAYS

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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By Diane Bair
and Pamela Wright
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

There are several good reasons to return to St. Lucia — it's green, it's gorgeous, it's in the wonderfully warm West Indies — but we have the best reason of all: We're going back to harvest our very own cocoa plants at Hotel Chocolat. Yep, in five years, our newly grafted cocoa plants will bear pods that will (if the chocolate gods are with us) produce some of the world's most sought-after chocolate.

Now that's a souvenir! In the meantime, we decided to do our bit to help St. Lucia's burgeoning chocolate industry by eating our way around the island and sampling chocolate everywhere, including beans, bars, martinis, cocoa tea, and chocolate spa treatments. Our chocolate-drenched trip included a visit to an organic chocolate plantation, a "sensory" chocolate tasting, and a tree-to-bar chocolate experience that culminated in making our own chocolate. Forget the beach: When it comes to St. Lucia, we're all about the bean.

Cocoa fields forever

"The first time chocolate came on a ship from Spain to St. Lucia, the St. Lucians thought it was animal dung, and burned it," said Wouter Tjeertes, director of pastry at Jade Mountain Resort. Fortunately, they realized the error of their ways. This Caribbean island was once a major banana producer, but farmers are starting to embrace chocolate in a big way. "St. Lucia has the best cocoa beans in the world," Tjeertes says. Drinking cocoa tea is an island tradition, and you can buy cocoa sticks as a souvenir, so why not gourmet chocolate? "Ninety percent of the world's chocolate is made by small boutique makers," and it's extremely profitable, he adds. "We're trying to raise awareness, saying, 'Hey, folks! Let's make chocolate out of these beans,'" says Tjeertes, who cops to eating chocolate every day for the past 18 years.

And that's what they're doing at **Jade Mountain**. This luxury resort, overlooking St. Lucia's iconic twin pitons (mountains), maintains an organic farm called Emerald Estate, with 1,000 cocoa trees on property. "My dream is, in five years or so, St. Lucia will become the Chocolate Capital of the Caribbean," says Tjeertes. "Beans from here have a pleasant acidity and an extreme fruitiness," he says. "This



Sampling the product at Hotel Chocolat in St. Lucia.

timates.

Our Tree to Bar Experience at Hotel Chocolat began with a walk through the estate's cocoa groves, where plump, yellow and purple cocoa pods are ready for harvest. Pods are harvested by hand, twisted off the cocoa tree, we discovered. The trees produce fruit for 100 years or more, Monroque said, and the three varieties grown at the Rabot Estate find their way into gourmet chocolate bars as well as tasty libations. Frankly, we learned more about chocolate production than we really wanted to know (and we're die-hard chocoholics), including the stages of seedling nursery, the fermenting room, and sun-drying station.

But we perked up when it came time to try our hands at grafting a cocoa plant in the nursery. Your name is put on the plant, so you can come back and visit it after its planted.

Next, we were led to a table laden with individual jars of cocoa butter, cocoa nibs, and sugar. Using a mortar and pestle, we ground the nibs, then added cocoa butter and powdered sugar ("The Europeans were the first to sweeten cocoa," Monroque said) and pounded like crazy, as our guide described how the tempering process (heating and cooling) gives chocolate a smooth, creamy texture.

More pounding ensued, but our chocolate paste was still gritty. No matter — our hosts let the amateur chocolatiers cheat a bit, arming each of us with tempered chocolate in a pastry bag. We piped the chocolate into a mold, settled in for lunch, and then, *voilà*. Our chocolate bars were solid enough to eat.

Time for some serious exercise: Maybe a hike up a piton or an energetic swim in Soufriere Bay. Speaking of pitons, Jade Mountain's pastry chef said he wants to create the world's most expensive chocolate bar, in the shape of St. Lucia, with each mountain a different flavor.

We'd definitely come back for that.

For information on chocolate-themed things to see and do in St. Lucia, visit www.stlucianow.com. For details on Jade Mountain's chocolate-themed activities: 800-223-1108; www.jademountain.com. To learn about the Tree-to-Bar Experience at Hotel Chocolat: 758-572-9600; www.hotelchocolat.com.

Diane Bair and Pamela Wright can be reached at bairwright@gmail.com.

Island of chocolate

one," he says, sampling a square of chocolate, "has a lot of dark fruit with a hint of banana, which combines beautifully with everything." At Emerald Estate, they grow vanilla beans next to cocoa trees, which adds another element to the flavor of the chocolate.

And if you think that sounds more like wine-tasting chat than conversation about chocolate, you haven't been to Jade Mountain's complimentary "Chocolate Sensory Tasting," a bean-to-mouth journey. In a small "chocolate lab," Tjeertes leads guests through the process of chocolate production, with a focus on sampling. First, you'll take a taste of the bitter little bean that ultimately results in an Emerald Estate Organic Chocolate bar (which sells for \$12 in the gift shop), along with samples of the roasted cocoa nibs, which are ground for 48 hours to achieve creaminess. Then, the chocolate is combined with organic cane sugar for sweetness.

We tasted chunks of chocolate with 92 percent cocoa — very bitter — and chocolate drops containing 78 percent cocoa. We tried a spicy chipotle bar, a bar studded with local cashews, and



PHOTOS BY DIANE BAIR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

one that tasted slightly raisin-y, but without actual raisins. "The next time you buy a bar, look at the wrapper and see what's in it," Tjeertes says. "The fewer ingredients, the better." When it comes to making a chocolate bar, less is more. When it comes to eating chocolate, though, "more" is our motto. We were just getting started.

Tree to bar

Alas, the Boston retail outlet of **Hotel Chocolat** has closed its doors, but St. Lucia's property is flourishing. Set within the **Rabot Estate**, Hotel Chocolat came to St. Lucia "to bring back the chocolate industry," according to Cuthbert Monroque, our guide on the Tree-to-Bar Experience. "We're not really hoteliers, but chocolatiers," he says, although there's an actual hotel called Boucan on the property. Hotel Chocolat started a program about seven years ago to encourage local farmers to raise chocolate, selling cocoa plants to farmers at subsidized prices to get the ball rolling. Now, about 168 local farmers are growing cocoa trees, in the shady hillsides of St. Lucia where the plants flourish. Cocoa trees are grown by grafting, not seed, something guests can try themselves on this tour de chocolate.

Monroque, who is head of agriculture at the Rabot Estate, tends 70 acres of organic cocoa trees on the property. Currently, the estate ships cocoa to the United Kingdom to produce the chocolate, but will start producing it in St. Lucia when a factory is completed "in the next couple of years," Monroque es-