

Grenada Back in Business as Genial Host

from The Washington Post, 17 Nov 07 - By Ann Geracimos

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Seen from the air, Grenada is the shape of a teardrop, a floating leaf in the ocean 120 miles square and 100 miles from the South American coastline. It's a country whose relatively small size belies its many flavors and contrasts, with enticements that go far beyond the allure of the fragrant nutmeg and cinnamon for which it is called "the Spice Island."

The country comprises three islands: Grenada and the much smaller Carriacou and Petite Martinique. The main island is best-known to Americans as the site of what some locals tactfully call "the US. intervention" in October 1983. After a coup brought a pro-Soviet-Cuban party to power about 24 years ago, U.S. forces invaded the country - ostensibly to protect Americans enrolled at the medical college in St. George's. Hurricane Ivan - the island's first hurricane in 50 years - proved a greater menace when it swept over the territory in 2004, devastating as much as 85 percent of the infrastructure and ruining a great deal of the agriculture upon which the island depends, along with tourism. Hurricane Emily, a lesser blow, arrived the next year, nearly killing the tourist trade. It took 10 days before telephone communication was restored, according to one resident. Nearby Venezuela, she says, was the first to send aid. Eventually, even U.S. Peace Corps volunteers appeared - some of whom have remained. Grenadians offshore returned home in great numbers to help relatives get back on their feet. The two events, coming so close together, were traumatic, and they tested the resilience of Grenada's 95,000 people. Now, Grenada is back in business, with ambitions that could make some other Caribbean islands jealous.

Cruise ships have returned. Airlines are adding more flights. Within the year, it is expected there will be direct flights to the island from Miami and New York several times a week. The best connections are made through Puerto Rico, Barbados or Jamaica.

'Do Good and Live' - a motto spotted on the back of one of the island's many taxi vans - sums up the optimistic attitude of the proud, self-sufficient islanders. "We know how to party more than to fight," says a high-spirited local resident who weathered Ivan sitting in her bathtub drinking beer. Ivan did not stop bottling operations at the island's oldest rum factory, the River Antoine Rum Distillery. Fabled Grand Anse Beach - a two-mile-long picture of unblemished sand and sea containing a mixture of high-end resorts on one end and a funky restaurant-disco at the other - has a few broken fences and some shattered buildings as reminders of those perilous times when winds blew off rooftops and shattered the island's infrastructure. The restaurant's owner rebuilt the establishment after the storms, and it hosts live jazz nights on a regular basis. The owner of the plush Spice Island Beach Resort, the island's most upscale hostelry (www.spiceislandbeachresort.com), added more features to the property, which has a commanding site on the beach.

Investors are catching on, some with visions of Grenada and its stunning harbor-side capital, St. George's, becoming another Saint-Tropez. That has some negative connotations, conjuring up an image of flashy jet-setter boutiques and a kind of decadence at odds with the island's more reserved personality. One of the most ambitious of the investing teams is led by British-born entrepreneur Peter de Savary, who appears aware of the dangers of such a franchise. "The way to

go is low density and learn from neighboring islands, such as Barbados, [that] got carried away. I don't want people to find Florida in Grenada," he says, relishing what he sees as a refreshing attitude toward work among Grenadians. "They want to learn." Local rules dictate that no one can build above the height of a palm tree. This creates a nice image but isn't entirely relevant on an island with mountainous terrain that offers some commanding views. The first of many de Savary projects to open was 125-room Mount Cinnamon, a beach hotel with private apartments - haciendas - that have access to Grand Anse Beach. (www.mountcinnamongrenada.com) Incorporated into the complex is a public restaurant, called Savvy's, that features Italian food with Caribbean flavors.

Food choices are abundant elsewhere, too. For a downhome experience, foodies end up at Patrick's, outside St. George's, where Patrick David offers a range of 20 authentic Caribbean recipes for a set price of \$37. Reservations are a must because each meal is custom-made. Mr. David also rents rooms at low cost, but for visitors seeking solitude - also at bargain prices - the Almost-Paradise complex at the northern tip of the island is ideal (www.almostparadisegrenadaxom). Another piece of the de Savary empire is a six-bedroom property farther down the coast known as Azzurra Castle. The Arabian Nights-fantasy outpost can be rented for \$25,000 a week. A contrasting experience can be found an hour north of the capital at the Mount Edgecombe Plantation, which also is owned by Mr. de Savary. Like forthcoming TUfton Hall, which is to be the island's first eco-spa, this plantation is in forested territory far from the madding crowds in town.

The most dramatic outpost will be a five-star luxury hotel with multimillion-dollar cliffside residences on Pandy Bay, across from St. George's, that is planned above a marina village and yacht basin called Port Louis. Mr. De Savary's aim at the Port Louis Yacht Club is to serve mega-yachts - up to 280 feet - that have trouble finding homes in other Caribbean waters. All this is costing a minimum half-billion dollars and definitely will introduce a lifestyle change to at least part of the laid-back island Mr. de Savary calls "romantic and charming and not at all claustrophobic." This from a man who once took part in the America's Cup Challenge in 1983 and has named a Grenada's charm can be found in several unusual traditions and attractions. One is the weekly street fair, the Gouyave Fish Friday Festival, when the fishing village of that name on the west coast hosts an open house for up to 2,000 people at a time. It's ostensibly a celebration of the day's fresh catch; vendors sell seafood dishes, drummers play, and limbo dancers entertain. Naturally, Gouyave is called "the town that never sleeps."

Like many other Caribbean islands, Grenada has a checkered history going back to the late 15th century. The British finally claimed the island in 1783 after protracted battles with the French. Plantations attest to the grim role slavery played in supporting Grenada's rich agricultural tradition. Tropical fruits of nearly every flavor can be found there, in addition to the fabled nutmeg and mace.

A legacy of the colonial period can be found in the far northeastern sector at the Belmont Estate, a 300-year-old working plantation that produces mostly nutmeg and cocoa.

Less known and less visible is an underwater sculpture gallery, probably unique in the Caribbean. The area, designated as a National Marine Park, is a 15-minute boat ride from St. George's. A swimmer has to look carefully to see a half-dozen stone and concrete artworks anchored to the sea bottom with the intention of forming a new artificial reef.

In unmarked depths - no more than 75 feet or so - rest silent, surreal shapes: a man sitting placidly at a desk; a group of figures in a circle of entwining hands; a kind of goddess face. The figures, by sculptor Jason Taylor, are meant to celebrate Caribbean culture and highlight environmental processes such as coral-reef regeneration. The Grenadian Ministry of Tourism and Culture hopes to expand the site and seeks sponsors for additional pieces.

More information can be found at www.underwatersculpture.com. Then there is the annual carnival celebration in August, which, after months of preparation, produces handsome displays of original costuming and masks, street theater and steel bands.