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Travel

A Chocolate Tour of the Caribbean



Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

Clockwise from top left: Three scenes from Hotel Chocolat, Fond Doux Estate, Delft Cocoa Estate, St. Lucia. Center: creation by Isabel Brash at Cocobel Chocolate. [More Photos »](#)

By BAZ DREISINGER

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ONE morning on St. Lucia, as I was waking from beatific dreams, I discovered that I had turned into a luscious, ripe cocoa pod.

Or so I imagined, borrowing freely from Kafka's opening line in "Metamorphosis." For three decadent days, I had been eating chocolate-stuffed liver pâté, cocoa-encrusted kingfish and, for breakfast, cocoa-and-cashew granola. At night I drank cocoa Bellinis. I indulged in a cocoa oil massage, hiked through cocoa fields and created my own chocolate bar.

Dawn consistently carried the pungent aroma of cocoa trees, because I was staying on a verdant cocoa estate — and sleeping in a cocoa pod.

Well, sort of: Hotel Chocolat, a boutique property in St. Lucia, features not rooms but “luxe pods,” where even the magnificently minimalist décor (rich mahogany floors, ivory-colored bathroom with open-air shower) evokes the essence of chocolate.

Hotel Chocolat’s union of tourism and agricultural development, specifically its devotion to all things cocoa, is part of a budding movement across the Caribbean. You might call it choco-tourism.

From Tobago to Dominica, Grenada to St. Vincent, the Caribbean cocoa industry, which has roots in colonial times, is being revitalized. This is excellent news economically: With free trade having all but destroyed the islands’ banana and sugar industries, fair-trade farming initiatives are a welcome boon.

And it's hardly small-change news; the world price of cocoa nearly doubled from 2004 to 2008, with an even greater increase for the rare genre of bean the Caribbean is feted for: fine-flavored cocoa, which makes up just 5 percent of the global market. What grows in the Caribbean is the Champagne of cocoa. It even has its own promotional team: the two-year-old [Caribbean Fine Cocoa Forum](#), a European Union-financed networking vehicle working to bolster production and exports in nine countries.

And then there is the tourism connection. Aficionados flock to Napa or the Loire Valley for wine tasting; why not go to stunning island locales to indulge in sun, sand, sea — and chocolate?

There is already, after all, a chocolate-themed Caribbean holiday offered by Silversea Cruises. In Belize, the annual [Toledo Cacao Festival](#) celebrates the cocoa-driven culture of the Mayan, Garifuna, East Indian and Creole people from the Toledo district. In Dominica, visitors can stay in the boutique [Cocoa Cottage](#) hotel; they can tour the [Agapey Chocolate Factory](#) in Barbados. The [Grenada Chocolate Company](#) pioneered the trend in 1999, offering tours of its factory, farm and Bon Bon Shop in the island's rain forest.

Earlier this year I followed the cocoa trail across four islands and three languages. Not only did it forever spoil Hershey's for me, my tour also proved to be an eye-opening journey through settings both rustic and grand. It carried me beyond umbrella-studded beaches to far-flung fields, untouched island landscapes and a local culture with a legacy well worth witnessing.

I began in Trinidad, where the cocoa industry is such a mainstay that the University of the West Indies there has a [Cocoa Research Center](#). The journey began in a very un-eco setting: [the glinting Hyatt Regency in Port of Spain](#), a bustling Caribbean capital with some of the region's liveliest night life. I checked in, watched the sun set over the infinity pool, ate delectably fresh sushi at the sleek lobby bar and took in a few hours of soca at cavernous Club Zen.

The next morning I landed in another world. "Welcome to Gran Couva — Home of Fine Flavor Cocoa," read the humble sign for one of the world's most feted cocoa fields, in the Montserrat Hills region of central Trinidad. I had driven 15 minutes from the sprawl of Port of Spain before green erupted everywhere: rolling hills, quaint plant shops, iguanas scurrying across the road.

Pulling into a driveway, past a green gate, I was greeted by a host of butterflies, thundering squawks from a caged macaw and the outstretched hand of Lesley-Ann Jurawan, owner of Violetta Fine Chocolates and Delft Cocoa Estate in Gran Couva. She wore a shirt marked "Montserrat Cocoa Farmers Co-op" and explained that the co-op, to which Delft belongs, exports some of its beans to the Valrhona company in France, whose Gran Couva bar pays homage to the region. Most Caribbean-sourced chocolate (with the exception of the Grenada Chocolate Company and most of the artisanal small-batch chocolates I tasted

during my tour) is produced in European cities, where the climate is more amenable to chocolate making.

“We have a long history, and we piggyback on it,” Ms. Jurawan said. That history goes back to the 1830s. White colonials, East Indians, French Caribbean émigrés and Venezuelan peons fleeing federalist wars all settled in Gran Couva and the north of the island to cultivate cocoa. They bred their own bean, the trinitario: a hybrid that has become one of three main kinds of [cocoa trees](#) grown worldwide.

“Voilà,” Ms. Jurawan said, handing me a shiny, scarlet trinitario pod. It fuses the prized complex and fruit-flavored criollo bean with the hardy forastero, the bulk bean, mostly sourced from West Africa, that accounts for some 70 percent of the chocolate we eat.

Jude Lee Sam, a cocoa farmer, sliced the pod and handed me half. The pulp had a mild flavor, acidic yet sweet. Then we made our way past vats of fermenting cocoa pulp and metal drying sheds with retractable roofs. On one side of the shed the wet beans smelled like, well, armpits. The aroma of the dry beans on the other side evoked, at last, the sweetness I’d come for.

THE ultimate reward came when Ms. Jurawan presented me with one of her own bars. “You’ll do a five-senses tasting,” she instructed. Obliging, I smelled the bar. I admired its style: a cocoa pod was imprinted on the chocolate. I felt its cool temperature. I broke it in half — “it should break cleanly, with a proper sound,” Ms Jurawan said.

Finally, I tasted; the fruity, spicy sensation made me momentarily understand why the Mayans, considered inventors of chocolate, were said to sacrifice humans in exchange for a good cocoa crop. This was to-die-for chocolate.

I got back into the car and ventured south, through the heart of Trinidad’s East Indian community, past homes decked out in Hindu prayer flags and temples resembling giant birthday cakes. I stopped at a roadside stand for sahina, a fried spinach-and-breadcrumbs patty. Eventually, I landed in the heart of the country’s oil belt, where flocks of white egrets encircled immense derricks, surreally protruding from the jade landscape. At the Rancho Quemado Estate, a cocoa cultivator and Agro-Eco Tourism Park, I meandered through a tilapia farm, an apiary and a mini-zoo featuring yellow-head parrots, boa constrictors and tortoises. The trails, lined by citrus and cocoa trees, proved the perfect place to linger in the light Caribbean rain.

Early next morning I ventured north, to another feted cocoa source. Gail’s Exclusive Tour Services whisked me away on a drive through the rain-forested Northern Range Mountains. We snaked up green hills, thick with bamboo and accented with flowers so dramatic they seemed artificial: red birds of paradise, dazzling orange shrimp’s tails. Again I was struck by how close yet how far Port of Spain was; there was barely a home or soul in sight, save the occasional local farmer, trekking up the mountain, machete in hand.

“Experience the Valley of Life,” read the sign beside the visitors center in the village of Brasso Seco, where I was handed a cup of the best hot cocoa of my life. My guide, Francis François, an Afro-Trinidadian with a weathered smile, took me on a hike through acres of criollo trees, laden with red and yellow pods. For additional revenue, the community sells coffee, cocoa powder, mango kuchela (a scrumptiously spicy condiment) and pepper sauce, the peerless Trinidadian staple.

Back in Port of Spain, at the Medulla Art Gallery — where a funky exhibition commemorating Trinidad’s 50th anniversary of independence was on display — I met three chocolatiers. Gina Sonia Hardy, a Singaporean, said she began making chocolate on a dare from her Trini mother-in-law. I accompanied her truffles (65 percent dark chocolate with rum, almonds and coconut) with a shot of Exotic Caribbean Mountain Pride dark chocolate liqueur, infused with nutmeg, clove, bay leaf and orange peel. When I told the company’s founder, Darill Astrida Saunders, that her elixir could put Bailey’s to shame, she said that it’s an old family recipe.

Cocobel Chocolate, meanwhile, makes Isabel Brash something of a Trini Willy Wonka; in the back of the gallery she creates everything from cocoa flower logos to delectable edibles, made from cocoa from Rancho Quemado, which her family owns. I didn’t know whether to photograph or eat her work: rum and raisin, mango pepper, espresso, all erupting with exuberant flavor.

Interestingly, most locals seem to prefer Hershey’s and Cadbury to these homegrown, primarily dark-chocolate creations. But all three women said they were slowly finding success in their home market, peddling their brands, which range from \$20 to \$35 for a box, in specialty shops and supermarkets across the island.

Next stop on the trail: Trinidad’s resort-driven sister island, Tobago, where I put my lazy tourist hat on at nonpareil beach bars serving Carib beer and curried crab and dumplings. But my goal was to investigate Tobago Cocoa Estate. Founded two years ago, the winner of gold stars from the Great Taste Awards in 2011 and 2012, it offers daily tours to tourists.

It was an hourlong drive north from Tobago’s capital, Scarborough, to the estate, on the fringes of the [Main Ridge Forest Reserve](#). I pulled into a clearing where a woman with a machete greeted me. Nan, an estate caretaker, let me know that “this place was all bush — took over five years to clear.” Now it’s an edenic 43-acre estate, home to some 22,000 cocoa trees and the crops that shade them: ginger, cherry, lime, guava, mango, avocado. It’s also beside the Argyle Waterfall, where a short hike through bamboo forests leads to cascading pools of chilly mountain water.

I hiked through the estate to a hilltop gazebo, where my guide, Harry, cracked open a pod for me to sample. Making my way to the gift shop, I stocked up on the 70 percent single-estate slice (“single estate” and “single domain” are the crème de la crème of chocolates, both referring to the bean origin), a tangy, fruity and stunningly unsweet treat.

SOME days later, I arrived at the Hotel Chocolat on the Rabot Estate in St. Lucia. Opened last year, Hotel Chocolat is more than a superior boutique hotel, and bigger than a brand — which it certainly is; the Rabot Estate marquee includes the hotel, an internationally available chocolate label (Rabot Estate), a restaurant chain ([Boucan](#), in St. Lucia, soon to be introduced to New York City and London), chocolate cafes in London and Stockholm and the new Roast & Conch shop, which brings small-batch chocolate making to London.

When the hotel's British-born owners embarked on their cocoa mission several years ago, they weren't alone; up the road, the 18th-century Fond Doux Estate has been operating cocoa tours and serving Creole lunches for over a decade. But Rabot Estate has carried Caribbean cocoa to new heights, and in many respects, has only just begun. Plans are under way for a tour-friendly chocolate factory, complete with research center, cafe and retail space: a complete tree-to-shop experience that will import beans from other islands and employ several hundred locals.

I devoted a full day to indulging in all the estate has to offer. There was a hike to its highest point, where I marveled at a 360-degree view of the Caribbean crowned by St. Lucia's magnificent landmark, the Piton Mountains. The Bean to Bar class involved mortar-and-pestle grinding, some cooking-show-style cheating (when it was time to pipe my chocolate into its mold, a ready-made bowl of liquid chocolate appeared) and a history lesson by Ron Lafeuille, a chef who seemed to drop every name in the storied history of the fruit, from colonizers to Cadbury. On the Tree to Bean tour, I discovered that grafting a pod involves far more slicing, taping and carving than I have patience for.

I rounded out the day with the Engaged Ethics Tour, which introduced me to some farmers who sell to the Rabot Estate. One of them, Alphonso Stanislas, told me that after growing cocoa for four decades, he could finally make a fair wage; like every other farmer I met on the cocoa trail, he told me that he's now planting more cocoa trees than ever before. "It's something I always felt we should capitalize on," he said. "Two things Americans and Europeans cherish: cocoa and chocolate."

I remained in this rural part of St. Lucia, with its black-sand beaches, waterfalls and mineral baths, for four days. When I craved urban action, I took in some reggae and country-and-western tunes at Whispers, a bar in Soufrière, a quaint (if somewhat run-down) town that time seems to have forgot. Towering over the region, the Pitons create the effect of two wildly different movie sets: By day they are jaunty and playful; by night, they're ominous shadows, shrouded in stars.

All epicurean adventures should end with rum and chocolate for breakfast. I had mine during a day trip from St. Lucia to neighboring Martinique. The 20-minute flight links radically different worlds; it felt mildly surreal to suddenly be making my way through Martinique's sleek European airport, cruising down a modern highway to a modish shop that could well be in Paris. If the proprietor has his way, it will be in Paris, and Dubai, the two places Thierry Lauzea, founder of locally made Frères Lauzea chocolate, has set his

sights on for future stores.

“We are not trying to be European — we are Caribbean chocolate,” Mr. Lauzea said, waving his hand about the shop, which was adorned in dazzling images of flora and fauna, sand and sea. Glass cases contain 35 flavors of truffles, from banana and curry basil to guava and coffee, each piece embellished with multihued trimmings.

Two men in black suits ushered in six-year-old Martiniquan rum vieux and chocolate ganache. Mr. Lauzea coached me in tasting techniques: sip and swallow the rum; bite the chocolate; sip more rum; swallow together. “When you have rum, it’s one personality,” he explained. “Chocolate, another. Blend them, another. It’s amazing!”

Reader, it was. The pairings were perfect: single-malt-finish rum and pungent orange chocolate. Litchi truffle with ultra smooth, sweet rum. “C’est parfum!” Thierry exclaimed. “How do you say? It’s a real orgasmic.”

After our tasting — and before a lunch of sesame conch and dorado at the newly opened Entre Nous — I drove into rural Martinique, to Elizabeth Pierre Louis’s farm in St.-Joseph, one source of Mr. Lauzea’s chocolate. As we trekked about, Elizabeth showed off the scene: sheep, roosters, coconuts, all manner of fruit tree. But one thing excited her above all.

“There it is!” she exclaimed. “The criollo. I only started planting them. That’s it — the treasure, right there.” Suddenly I was struck by the fact that I could be in Trinidad, or St. Lucia, or many other Caribbean islands — all of them pinning hopes on this singular crop whose history weaves a storied connection between disparate lands. And this I now know: it’s a sweet, sweet connection, indeed.

Chocolate Tourism, Beans to Bar

ACCOMMODATIONS

[The Hyatt Regency Trinidad](#) (1 Wrightson Road, Port of Spain; 868-623-2222; trinidad.hyatt.com) has an infinity pool with views of the Gulf of Paria, and a breakfast buffet of local favorites. From \$209.