

Travel + Leisure

# Experiences

TRAVELERS' TALES FROM NEAR AND FAR

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## A NEW DAY FOR DOMINICA

With the help of community-minded hotels and visitors eager to give back, this Caribbean island beloved by adventure seekers is making a rapid recovery from Hurricane Maria. BY GINA DECAPRIO VERCESI

DOMINICA IS A wild place, but nothing in its wilds can hurt you. No venomous snakes lurk along the jungle trails. No deadly insects skitter beneath the layer of duff that carpets the rain-forest floor. Instead of menacing critters, I saw gulf fritillaries open and close their wings atop ▶

*Villas at Secret Bay, a luxury resort on the island of Dominica with access to a secluded beach.*

► fiery blossoms, territorial hummingbirds flit in an iridescent blur to ward off trespassers, and golden-armored land crabs stand at attention, pincers outstretched in mock threat.

Unlike other spots in the West Indies, where the primary lure is lounging on a powder-white shore with a cocktail, travelers journey to Dominica, a volcanic island between Martinique and Guadeloupe, for adventure. Miles of rain-forest trails lead to black-sand beaches fringed by coral reefs, to waterfalls that cascade into swimming holes, and to a bubbling fumarole—a rift in the earth’s crust near a volcano—called Boiling Lake.

One humid morning last December, I slogged up the Waitukubuli National Trail in the rain. On the last section of the slope, I dropped onto a log, where my guides, two young Dominicans named Dylan and Fabian, were taking a breather. They had come to clear debris left by Hurricane Maria, and I had come to lend a hand.

Outdoor enthusiasts champion Dominica as an ecotourism destination, in part because of the 115-mile Waitukubuli, which stretches the length of the island. It’s divided into 14 segments, each of which can be hiked in a day. But the trail became impassable after Maria ripped through Dominica in 2017, bringing high winds and driving rains that also wiped out farmland and villages. Now, island hotels and guides have introduced post-hurricane voluntourism projects, including trail rehabilitation, for visitors who wish to assist in the recovery.

My home base on Dominica was the newly reopened Secret Bay resort, six private villas on the northwestern coast. Through the resort’s concierge, I connected with Annette Peyer Loerner, a Swiss expat who owns the rustic Tamarind Tree Hotel with her husband, Stefan. After the hurricane, Annette adopted Segment 11 of the trail, taking responsibility for its clearing and maintenance. Since work began, Annette has cleared about one-third of the eight-mile stretch, part of which passes through Morne Diablotin National Park, home to Morne Diablotin, the island’s tallest mountain.

My day on the Waitukubuli began when I met up with Annette at the trailhead, where she was waiting with a few other volunteers. We set out along the cleared portion of Segment 11. After an hour of hiking, we reached the point where work had stopped. Fabian stepped into the dense

undergrowth and pulled out power tools that had been concealed under a tarp. Annette opened a rucksack that held scythes, rakes, and heavy gloves. As she doled out the equipment, Fabian fired up the chain saw. Up the trail, he cut fallen trunks and limbs that obstructed our path while Dylan whacked at a tangle of vines and razor grass. The rest of us followed behind, heaving logs and heaps of brush into the surrounding forest.

When I wasn’t working, my bungalow at Secret Bay provided a plush refuge. Each morning I sipped coffee on the deck overlooking Cabrits National Park while bananaquits perched on the railing, eyeing my breakfast papaya. A wooden staircase wound down to Tibay Beach, where I snorkeled beside a rocky cliff, watching multicolored parrotfish munch on coral.

Secret Bay’s owner, Gregor Nassief, has a passion for immersing his guests in the culture and natural beauty of the island. I drank a sorrel-and-ginger infusion and dined on invasive (and delicious) lionfish speared by Don Mitchell, the resort’s boat captain. I paddled the Indian



▲ The Emerald Pool, in Morne Trois Pitons National Park.

► From top: The coastline of northern Dominica; one of three honeymoon villas at Secret Bay.



River with Fire (born Patrickson Lockhart), a dreadlocked boatman who pointed out native flora. And I searched the trees for parrots on the Syndicate Nature Trail with local ornithologist Bertrand Jno Baptiste, otherwise known as Dr. Birdy.

Despite the plywood-covered windows, headless coconut trees, and sheets of galvanized

roofing along the roadside, there were moments when I almost forgot Maria had been here. Every afternoon, gentle mountain rains mixed with sunlight to paint huge rainbows that arced over the shoreline. Hills that had been stripped bare burst with bright green foliage. Roads and hotels had reopened. And the island’s rare, endemic parrots, the sisserou and the jaco, announced their presence with distinctive squawks, allaying fears that they had fled to Guadeloupe—though they stayed hidden during our morning mission on Segment 11.

That afternoon I floated in the warm sea, letting the salt water bathe the incisions the razor grass had made on my skin. Overhead, the daily rainbow began to take shape, along with the glimmer of a twin, and I recalled that a local woman I’d met at dinner the night before had told me there had been more double rainbows since Maria.

“I think,” she said, “that it’s nature’s way of cheering us up.”



## Helping Dominica

You can support this Caribbean destination just by visiting, but there are many ways to add a service component to your travels.

Maria’s winds scalped the jungle canopy, allowing sunlight to reach formerly shaded sections of the forest floor. Because of this, fresh growth can swiftly reclaim cleared trails, making maintenance crucial. The **Fort Young Hotel** ([fortyounghotel.com](http://fortyounghotel.com); doubles from \$244), in the capital of Roseau, rehabilitated Segment 3 of the Waitukubuli National Trail. Guests can assist in keeping the eight-mile stretch weed-free, while bathing at multiple hot springs along the way.

At **Secret Bay** ([secretbay.dm](http://secretbay.dm); doubles from \$909), Fort Young’s sister property, guests who participate in the resort’s “Nurture the Nature Island” experience will venture along a portion of Segment 11 with the ornithologist Dr. Birdy, learning about and helping with regrowth of native trees. Guests can also choose to help clear the beaches of the hurricane debris that continues to wash up on them.

New resorts promise to further aid the island. **Cabrits Resort & Spa Kempinski** ([kempinski.com](http://kempinski.com)) is scheduled to open in November, with a mission to sustain the surrounding Cabrits National Park. —G.D.V.