

I can see clearly now

Hiking used to be a purely physical challenge for **Paul Crask**. But as they aim for the peak of Dominica's Morne Trois Pitons, his Rastafarian friend Octave gently teaches him to enjoy the climb, not just the conquest



CELIA SORHANDO

I really enjoy hiking, even though these days I know my aging muscles and bones will tend to gripe at me the morning after. But recently I've discovered that the days when I would take on a hiking challenge just for the hell of it (and the reward of cold beers at the end) have been transcended by a desire to learn more about the beauty and diversity of the environment. I still relish those beers, but the hike itself has become as much a journey for my mind as it always has been for my body.

I like to hike with Octave, a good friend who grew up in Dominica. He is a Rastafarian who makes a living as a tour guide and, with his wife Rahel, runs a small eco-cottage called Hide-Out on the banks of the pretty Geneva River on Dominica's south coast. In the low season, Octave tends the fruits and vegetables in his garden, repairs his simple house, and sells coconuts for a few dollars at the market in the capital, Roseau. His garden is an education in itself; he often spends time walking around it with his guests, pointing out the wide variety of fruit trees, flowers and unassuming plants that most would overlook, but which he uses to make bush teas – delicious herbal infusions that offer natural remedies.

On a climb up the steep slopes of Morne Trois Pitons, namesake of one of Dominica's three national parks and itself a Unesco World Heritage Site, Octave crouches and points to something in the dense foliage. "*Siffleur montagne*, the mountain whistler, properly known as the rufous-throated solitaire," he whispers. "Listen." The unmistakable whistle of the bird that accompanies hikers through Dominica's elevated rainforest, yet is notoriously elusive, almost pierces my eardrums, it is so close. I stare into the foliage, determined to spot it. My eyes strain so hard they almost bleed as I follow Octave's pointing finger. And miracles do happen, because I do see it. Indeed, how on earth could I miss it, I wonder? With its light grey chest and bright red throat, this unassuming bird sits on the branch of a



PAUL CRASK

Above Octave enjoys the view from the top **Opposite page** The Trois Pitons Trail

young balsa tree, a *bois flot*, belting out a tune just for us, it seems. Octave grins at me. “You see it now?”

As we tramp onwards and upwards, he points out *bois bandé*, a tree whose bark is considered an aphrodisiac, *tabac zombie*, a plant whose leaves make a warming tea to combat colds, and *bois fou fou*, the vibrant hummingbird tree. And then, right on cue, a purple-throated Carib hummingbird enters from stage right and performs an airborne pirouette.

Trying to consume and retain information about Dominica’s natural environment is a little like attempting to eat all the food at a wedding reception. There is so much, you just can’t do it.

“Is there a bush tea that might help me remember all these things?” I joke.

“You could try basilic,” Octave replies earnestly. “Mixed with a little rosemary.”

There are around 200 recorded species of fern in Dominica. The island boasts two endemic Amazonian parrots, the sisserou and the jaco, four species of hummingbird, 75 species of orchid, around 200 observed species of birds, and 50 butterflies. Rainforest is by far the most widespread vegetation type, most of it untouched by man. There is an incredible diversity of plants, trees and flowers, from the mighty *gommier* or gum tree, from which the Kalinago, Dominica’s indigenous people, continue to hand-craft canoes, to variegated anthuriums, ginger lilies and heliconias. An explosion of life, a riot of colour. So much to learn, appreciate and protect.

At the peak of the mountain the views extend in all directions. A blanket of green *clusia* and *miconia* bushes, interrupted by occasional protrusions of mountain palms and bromeliads, fills our

entire field of vision. In the distance is Dominica’s highest volcano, Morne Diablotin, and beyond it the hills of Guadeloupe.

We have been scrambling up rocks and climbing through tree branches for the last half-hour and I am nicely caked in a thick soup of sweat and sticky mud. And beneath this layer of grime, my skin has become decorated with a fine patchwork of razor-grass scratches. In complete contrast, Octave is so clean and tidy he looks like he has simply drifted up the mountain on the light trade winds. Annoyingly, he does this every time.

Like all genuine Rastafarians, Octave places great emphasis on the value of nature; indeed, his lifestyle is interwoven with it. At home he grows organic produce and his family chooses not to eat meat.

“Is there a bush tea you drink on a regular basis?” I ask.

“We drink dandelion tea almost every day, mixed with something else like lemongrass or rosemary.

Usually at night-time before we go to bed,” he says. “All plants have their own qualities and benefits, you understand. It depends on what your body is telling you it needs at the time.”

My mind wanders to those cold beers at this point.

“I drink plenty of coconut water,” he continues. “Sometimes three or four jellies a day. Coconuts are very, very good for you.”

On our way back down the mountain, two jaco parrots take off in a cacophony of squawking, their brilliant green and red plumage illuminated by the afternoon sun. Along the trail, an agouti nibbles at a piece of *gommier* fruit, a windfall for this timid forest mammal. It pauses for a moment, sniffs the air (I realise I must be fairly ripe myself by this point), and then skedaddles into the darkness and mystery of the undergrowth.

Hiking has become as much a journey for my mind as it always has been for my body



An agouti skedaddles into the undergrowth

Octave is so clean and tidy he looks like he has simply drifted up the mountain on the light trade winds. Annoyingly, he does this every time

“Birds’ nest anthurium,” says Octave. “And look, a bee orchid,” he smiles, cradling a delicate yellow flower in his leathery hands. I know this is a contest I will never win, but, true to my sporting English roots, I really enjoy taking part. Because to me this is what hiking in Dominica has become. No longer a forced march, a get-to-the-end-if-it-bloody-well-kills-me challenge, a walk in these pristine forests has turned into a consummate pleasure, and a marvellous education.

We get back to my truck and Octave borrows my cutlass to open a couple of coconuts he brought along. We sit on the lemongrass verge sipping their delicious waters and scraping out the sweet jelly to eat. Before us is the mountain, Morne Trois Pitons, majestic and serene. Yet the verdant shroud of its canopy hides a world of magnificence and complexity. Somewhere up there, the mountain whistler is still singing, the hummingbirds still dancing, and an agouti is nibbling a piece of forest fruit whose name I have already forgotten. ■

“Z’ailes mouches,” says Octave, pointing to the dual-lobed palm-like leaves. This one I know. These plants are traditionally used by the Kalinago for roof-thatching and to line the inside of *larouma* basketware to make it waterproof. “Elephant ear anthurium,” I grin, looking at a plant with huge leaves that is clinging to the trunk (appropriately enough, though no pun intended) of a beautiful giant tree fern, known as *fougère*.