



THE PIANO ON THE BEACH ON LUSCIOUS ST. LUCIA

By Vera Marie Badertscher

On the East Winds Resort's dessert table, the aroma of rum hovered above a dome of golden cake attended by a deep bowl of whipped cream and a cordon of rum bottles.

"You take some cake, pour on the rum, and everyting gonna be alll-right," said our waiter, flashing a big smile, the common currency of St. Lucia.

He was right.

My husband and I went to St. Lucia in the British West Indies to find a Steinway piano that lives on the beach and learn out how a delicate instrument can survive outdoors in such a climate.

The 7-foot Steinway & Sons grand piano dominates the dining room at the East Winds Inn on the northwest side of this lush island. Many dining rooms in fine hotels have Steinways, but few have settings like this one. While there is a roof overhead, no exterior walls separate the diners, or the piano, from the beach. Mere steps away, waves swish rhythmically onto the sand. A roof of braided palm fronds under a sturdier upper roof peaks over the circular building. The ocean breeze rattles through the palm trees arching overhead.

Piano technician Michael Lipnicki travels from Calgary, Canada, to the Caribbean to care for island-dwelling pianos. To his knowledge, East Winds Inn was the first resort in the Caribbean to invest in a Steinway. "Certainly it is the only outdoor Steinway at a Caribbean resort," he says. "It is a bold move."

Owners George and Marilyn Reti, frequent visitors to East Winds from Canada, bought the property in April 2006 and added the Steinway piano shortly thereafter.

"Our interest in Steinway pianos goes back a long way, and was highlighted by our 1997 purchase of No. 90/200 in the 200th anniversary model Limited Edition Piano Series, J.B. Tiffany Design, in African rosewood," George Reti wrote in an e-mail. "In fact, it was attending the [St. Lucia] Jazz Festival over the years, that inspired us to actually consider bringing a Steinway piano permanently to our resort ... Steinway & Sons sends at least two concert pianos to St. Lucia for the Jazz Festival. ... So why couldn't they send three?"

"We immediately called Irene Besse, the Steinway dealer we knew so well from Calgary," Reti goes on. "As it turned out, the official piano tuner for the Jazz Festival for all these years, Michael Lipnicki, was also from Calgary."

The owners hope to have regular events like a special one that the St. Lucia School of Music arranged last year. At a master class for 10 people at East Winds, Michael Voskresenski, Russian piano master, used the Steinway.

East Winds' 30 rooms in pastel cottages or round cabins scattered through a seaside garden accommodate only 60 people.

When Welsh native Gareth Leach arrived in 1991 to oversee the razing of a prior hotel and the building of East Winds, he thought he would only stay a short time. However, like many guests, he stayed longer than he planned; he is now the inn's general manager.

Photo courtesy of East Winds Inn

Guests can enjoy listening to the Steinway grand piano at the East Winds Inn's Flamboyant Room restaurant.

DISCOVERY RESORT AND MARINA AT MARIGOT BAY



Photocourtesy of Discovery Resort and Marina

Steep hillsides form a deep bowl around Marigot Bay and a spit of land almost closes the entry, creating a “hurricane hole” that protects from coastal storms. During World War II, local fishermen watched in shock as a German submarine surfaced in their midst. Today, captains sail super yachts into the super deep water.

Present owner Judith Verity says, “Marigot Bay is a bay of stories. It has a lot of history.”

The stories mix with legend. The British and French fought a fierce battle here, and a doubloon that washed ashore fueled rumors of pirate ships and hidden treasure.

Adventurer Walter Boudreau first sailed into the bay in 1949 and built a hotel and bar that attracted celebrities looking for a place to hide. Visitors included Hollywood stars, American presidents, and Winston Churchill as well as the cast and crew of Rex Harrison’s *Doctor Dolittle*, which was filmed here.

When Boudreau returned to his native Nova Scotia in the 1980s, he left behind a massive stone building and walls now incorporated into the Discovery Resort. The renovated Hurricane Hole Bar still welcomes people looking for a tropical hideaway with its original sign and copper lamps from Boudreau’s dinghy.

In 2006, British sailing enthusiasts John and Judith Verity celebrated the opening of their dream resort and marina. Besides the resort, Lapli Spa, and shops at Marina Village, future plans include banquet and meeting rooms, a gymnasium, and other enhancements.

Wooden stairs climb through lushly landscaped hillsides to the 57 suites and 67 rooms in four- and five-story buildings. Suites, for sale as condo units, feature completely equipped kitchens and laundries. Hardwood floors, ceiling fans, and plantation shutters evoke a traditional island look in the otherwise spare modern decor. Judith describes the décor chosen with

the help of daughter Olivia Gavin as “sharp-edged and modern in contrast with the exterior,” which “should disappear into the landscaping.”

Veronica Shingleton Smith, landscaper of Discovery, left her fledgling British theater career for a “delicious” man she met in St. Lucia back in 1952. “I didn’t know what to do with myself, so I started a garden,” she says. That became Mamiku Estate, which she later opened to tourists.

Smith walks through the Discovery gardens and introduces a visitor to some of the “300 to 400 varieties” of plants as though they were members of her family. Some contribute a certain color. Some cover disturbed soil over pipes. The neem tree repels bugs. Many varieties of hibiscus lend an exotic air.

The government protects Marigot Bay’s mangrove-lined shores in a conservation area. Discovery Resort treads lightly on the land by conserving water, using native products, promoting a solar-powered ferry, and keeping the bay pristine. John and Judith’s son Sam Verity sunk a boat in the bay to facilitate the creation of a reef. He scouts out locations for trails through the surrounding jungle where guests can learn about native flora and fauna.

Another son, James, a chef, owns the Rainforest Hideaway Restaurant across the bay. While John handles the business, Judith concentrates on programming with an emphasis on her long-time interest in self improvement programs, like the upcoming life coaching class, Big Leap. www.discoverstlucia.com



The new garden alone took seven months to establish. He says, "Nine people on staff tend the gardens, constantly watering, trimming, replanting." And the reward comes when the well-named flamboyant tree bursts into flame-colored bloom, and tropical flowers dodge mangoes and coconuts falling from native trees. Guests with a deeper interest in botany can peruse a booklet that identifies the plants throughout the property.

The golden strip of beach stays as spotlessly clean as the rest of the resort. Each morning we peek out from the shutters in our ocean-view room to reassure ourselves that the postcard view is real. And each morning we see a man in black pants and a white shirt raking the sand to clear away any debris of nature or man. The sand will remain sugar soft between our toes as long as he is on duty.

Guests can opt to include all meals in their plan. Morning and noon, cooks pile tables with tropical delights like soursop, custard apple, mangoes, and bananas by the ton beside spicy island

concoctions. More formal service in the evening includes a weekly fish fry on the barbeque. Guest Ingvar Svenson from Sussex came with his wife, Anna, for a few days one year and came back for two weeks the following year. When asked about restaurants in the vicinity, he claimed to have no knowledge. "We didn't go out," he said. "With the wonderful food here, why should we?"

Dinner includes entertainment – steel drum bands, jazz trios, or pianists playing on the Steinway. Eugene Payne, a retired aircraft company executive, returned to his first love – piano – when he retired.

He now plays his beloved jazz and pop standards two nights a week at East Winds, alternating with two other pianists. Payne never played a Steinway piano before coming here. He says, "Sometimes you are not in the mood, but this piano changes your mood because it is such a nice instrument. It spoils you for playing other places."

Music enveloped the island in May when my husband and I visited. While high humidity might

Nestled among 12 acres of lush tropical gardens, East Winds' cozy cottages promise relaxation.



East Winds Inn offers golden beaches, scenic views, and beachfront gazebos.

damage a musical instrument, hurricane season seemed far away, and anyhow, the worst storms tend to miss St. Lucia. So as we roamed the island's tropical forests, banana plantations, and brightly colored villages, we were not thinking of such things as high winds and storm surges.

At the Derek Walcott Square in the center of nearby Castries, the entire grassy block had nearly disappeared under an enormous stage for Jazz in the Square. In a tent, technicians fiddled with amps and tuners, and booths sold everything from ice cream bars to batik scarves to rum drinks.

For a week in May, St. Lucia's native drums, fiddles, and banjos are joined by the wail of saxophones and the rhythms of keyboards at venues all around the island for the St. Lucia Jazz Festival. Free programs at Derek Walcott Square attract a mix of office workers and tourists from noon until dusk Monday through Friday. The statues of poet Derek Walcott and economist Sir Arthur Lewis, two St. Lucian Nobel Prize laureates, hid behind the festival fencing. Tiny tots sat

on the ground in front of the stage in their blue and white outfits, the girls with hair braided and beaded.

Rain sprinkled down, interrupting activity as though someone had pushed a pause button. When it abruptly stopped a few minutes later, life started anew. As viewers vied for bits of shade, an announcer ushered on students of about 10 years old in orange shirts and jeans. They filed on the stage with their violins and sawed back and forth conscientiously as backup to Black Antz. The young jazz group started at St. Lucia Music School. The music thrummed with a strong beat, a mixture of Caribbean rhythm and jazz tunes.

The on and off rain continued as we wandered away from the jazz performance area. Two blocks away, along the bay where cruise ships dock, the modern architecture of a three-story duty-free shopping mall, La Place Carenage, contrasts with the older surrounding buildings. Nothing is really old in Castries except the cathedral on the square

AROUND THE ISLAND

TREETOP TRAM

Founded in Costa Rica, Rainforest Aerial Tram provides a 60-minute adventure through giant ferns, trailing vines, and towering trees. Local guides provide commentary on the environment as you glide in an open car suspended by cables. Or unleash your inner Tarzan with a zip-line adventure. Hike a trail from the top of the tramway, don a hard hat, and hang on to the harness as you glide from one platform to the next. Those who prefer to keep their feet on the ground can hike one of the many trails into this unspoiled area and marvel at the 200 species of plants and 400 kinds of tropical birds. Just a half-hour from Castries, St. Lucia Sky Rides can arrange to pick you up at your hotel. www.rfat.com

A DRIVE AROUND THE ISLAND

If you feel comfortable with driving on the left side of the road on narrow, steep, winding roads, rent a car and explore on your own. Wimps like us opt for taxi drivers, all of whom are trained as guides. A circle drive takes you to most of the high points of the 238-square-mile island, including Mamiku Gardens, the Pitons, colorful villages, banana plantations, and a drive-in volcano.

There are many choices for taxi companies, and all the drivers must qualify as guides. We chose Nerv's Taxi Service, nervstaxi@hotmail.com (758-716-1893).

DINING

East Winds Inn, Gros Islet www.eastwinds.com

Non-guests can reserve for dinner in the open-air Flamboyant Room restaurant and hear the Steinway performance.

Caribbean Pirates, Castries www.caribbeanpiratesltd.com

Reputation for the best local food, particularly seafood, in Castries.

Dasheene restaurant at Ladera Resort www.ladera.com/dining.html

Clinging to a mountainside 1,000 feet above the sea, the Ladera Resort looks straight out at the green Pitons and the blue sea. The diner has a balcony seat on the most dramatic scenery of the Caribbean – if he looks up from his plate of native seafood, plantains, and chocolate flan served in a coconut shell. At Dasheene restaurant, Chef Orlando Satchell strives to put Caribbean, “the true fusion cuisine,” on the international map.

Rainforest Hideaway Restaurant www.rainforesthideawaystlucia.com/home.htm

Hop on the ferry for a two-minute ride across Marigot Bay and come early to grab a seat on the very edge of the open pier that forms the main room of the restaurant. You can watch fish glide by as you savor the inspired cuisine created by Jim Verity and his friendly crew.

with its streaked concrete and squat bell tower. Multiple fires over the decades destroyed most of the former colonial buildings. Modern bank buildings in the downtown area alternate with older balconied residential buildings painted in bright colors.

A short distance away, the sprawling St. Lucia market attracts shoppers looking for everyday

items as well as unique St. Lucian crafts. Curious about the school that teaches classical music on an island steeped in traditions of calypso and “soca,” or soul calypso, I paid a visit to the St. Lucia School of Music.

Started in 1988 by a group of volunteers, the School of Music offers classical music training to everyone from pre-school children to senior citizens.

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MUSIC FESTIVALS IN THE CARIBBEAN

St. Lucia is not alone in sponsoring a music festival. No matter the genre, if it is music, there will be a festival featuring that music. Here, in alphabetical order by island, are some of the biggest.

ANGUILLA

Moon Splash Annual Music Festival, March
Rock, jazz, reggae, and blues
www.anguilla-vacation.com
www.bankiebanx.net/moonsplash.html

Tranquility Jazz Festival, November
www.anguilla-vacation.com
www.anguillajazz.org

BARBADOS

Jazz Festival, January
www.barbados.org/events

Digicel Barbados Reggae Festival, April
www.barbados.org/evnmus.htm

Barbados Gospelfest, May
www.barbadosgospelfest.com

The Holders Opera Season, February 23-March 15, 2008
Opera, theater, cabaret
www.holders.net

DOMINICA

Annual World Creole Music Festival, October or early November
www.festivalmusiquecreoledominique.com/english.htm

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC (Santo Domingo)
The Latin Music Festival/Presidente Festival, June

Festival del Merengue, late July or early August
www.godominicanrepublic.com

Jazz Festival, October or early November
www.drjazzfestival.com
www.godominicanrepublic.com

GUADALOUPE (Marie-Galante)

Festival Terre de Blues, May
www.lesilesdeguadeloupe.com/2/home-guadeloupe.htm

GRENADA

Carriacou Maroon Music Festival, April
Big Drum Nation Dance, string band music, and quadrille dancing
www.spiceisle.com/drumkrumah

JAMAICA

Air Jamaica Jazz & Blues Festival, late January
<http://airjamaicajazzandblues.com>

Reggae Sumfest, July
www.reggaesumfest.com

MARTINIQUE

Jazz a la Martinique, early December, odd numbered years, with a guitar festival in even-numbered years.
www.cmac.asso.fr

ST. BARTHELEMY

The Saint-Barths' Music Festival, January
Classical music, opera, ballet, and jazz
www.st-barths.com/guidepgs/musicfstvl.html

ST. KITTS

St. Kitts Music Festival, June
Wide variety of popular music types – R&B to reggae
www.stkittsmusicfestival.net

ST. VINCENT

Bequia Music Festival and Mustique Blues Festival, January
Blues and Rhythm Festival, March
Gospel Music Festival, April
Nine Mornings, December
Carol Singing Competition, December
www.insandoutssvg.com/article.aspx?articleid=259&Sone=festivals

TORTOLA

BVI Music Festival, May
Reggae, gospel, blues, and salsa
www.bvimusicfest.info

TRINIDAD

Perhaps the most unusual musical event in the Caribbean takes place in Trinidad:
Pan Is Beautiful – every two years, World Pan Festival alternate years (schedules not set for next competition). In the final competition, bands play one classical and one soca piece. Orchestras may be composed of 100 steel drums, with the players in full evening dress. They play little numbers like Mozart's G minor Symphony or Gershwin's "American in Paris."
www.worldsteelbandfestival.com



Photo courtesy of Rainforest Aerial Tram

Rainforest Aerial Tram provides a guided adventure through St. Lucia's towering trees in an open car suspended by cables.

The school occupies some crumbling buildings set on a hill high above the town of Castries with a beautiful view of the sea. Fading murals depicting musicians decorate the outside walls and students and faculty make do with a rickety wood building for recitals. An enormous flamboyant tree dominates the space between the two main buildings.

Although the school started with no instruments at all and now has many, including five upright pianos, British Director John Bailey says, "It would be nice to have a small grand for recitals."

In the beginning, everybody worked for free. Boo Hinkson, now a well-known musician, taught guitar. Eventually, with government support, they grew to the present staff of five full-time and 20 part-time teachers. About 400 students a term attend in the evening and on weekends. While one-third of the students are adults, the children must fit classes around academic school and work.

The impact and influence of the school far outreach its physical plant or the supply of instruments teachers have to work with. Bailey says although no one from the school has become a concert performer, there are 15 different St. Lucian bands playing on cruise ships, and musicians are in demand at the many resorts on the island. Perhaps one-tenth of the students intend to pursue a profession in music, but Bailey says, "A part of the job or service of the School of Music is to educate an audience. We try to develop a love for music and for different kinds of music."

The city has approved plans for additions to the school that would expand classrooms and provide a decent recital hall but with constant repairs needed on the old buildings, the fund for the new school grows slowly. In addition to the benefit recital for St. Lucia Music School performed by the Russian master, Voskresenski, Vladimir Ashkenazy has given three benefit

concerts. Ashkenazy has a part-time home on the island.

After our conversation at the school, Bailey gathered up some staff members and went to Derek Walcott Square to sell raffle tickets. He and I continued around the bay and up to the island's cultural center, a plain block building on a high hill.

At one concert for which Lipnicki tuned, "Chi Chi Rodriguez wanted a super percussive sound. Right after him on the program, Ibrahim Abrams, who plays mel-low jazz, wanted a totally different sound." When Abrams heard the piano he said, "The piano sounds nervous." So between sets, Lipnicki retuned the Steinway grand. "I've never worked on any other brand that would let me go to such extremes," Lipnicki says.

"Here [in St. Lucia] many times on the outdoor stage the sun bakes the piano during the day. I go early in the morning. The light is beautiful, the sun on the water, and I feel like I have the best job in the world. I check later in the day and the pitch is changed. I have to resist the temptation to adjust at that point, because it will change again in the evening. The challenge is to figure out how much to float the pitch so you are right at 440 [the 'A' pitch in music physics]."

The heat and humidity conspire to destroy fine instruments on a tropical island. Lipnicki tunes the East Winds Steinway piano twice a year to keep up with the atmospheric challenges. He advised the installation of a humidity control system. The dehu-

midifier sits inside a contained area created by the piano's fitted cover that reaches to the floor. A special string cover, that does not touch the strings, protects them from rust. They have drawn up plans to guide reaction to a hurricane. And soon East Winds would have to act on those plans. But for now some wind would be welcome to counter the May heat.

The St. Lucian National Trust manages Pigeon Island, which sticks out like a beak on the northwest of the main island. Workers swarmed over the tree-shaded park, normally a quiet retreat, on Friday afternoon before the evening concert that opens the main show of the Jazz Festival.

Walking in on the dirt road, we saw some tumbled stone walls on the right that formed a backdrop of an enormous modern amphitheater stage. We were looking at the setting for "Jazz among the Ruins." With its huge light stanchions, sound booth, and dressing rooms below the stage, this could be a year-round theater rather than a temporary venue. To our left we saw a lawn circled with wooden booths, each bearing the name of a community or area of the island and each painted in a brilliant color.

After watching for a bit as technicians did sound checks and Lipnicki pinged a tuning fork, we marched uphill past more ruins. There, Fort Rodney stood guard over the bay of the same name. Built for 18th century tussles between the French and English, the fort also had a workout during World War II when American troops

1973: Elton John Conquers America with a Steinway and a Helpinstill.

What's a Helpinstill?

Elton John was criss-crossing the United States on his first major tour, playing on a Steinway "D" Concert Grand every night. When his tour reached Texas, a young engineer and pianist named Charles Helpinstill came backstage with an invention that would change forever the way pianos were amplified in concert. With that piano pickup on his Steinway, Elton John went on to become a rock legend, Charles Helpinstill became Ezra Charles, the King of Texas Blues, and the Helpinstill Piano Sensor quickly was adopted by the entire concert industry as the standard method of using a piano on stage.

Today Helpinstill continues to be the preferred, unique method for connecting a piano to a sound system used by Churches, Theaters, Universities, and yes, Rock Stars. Today names like Norah Jones, Sarah McLaughlin, Alicia Keys, and every other piano-playing artist that dominates the record charts relies on Helpinstill to get their music to the audience. By utilizing a patented method of sensing the piano's sound-producing mechanisms with magnetic pickups, the Helpinstill Piano Sensor is able to offer a clear signal that never feeds back or hears any other instruments around the piano.



www.helpinstill.com



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713.432.1089



Photo courtesy of www.stlucia.org

St. Lucia's most famous landmarks, the twin peak Pitons, stretch more than 2,000 feet skyward.

operated here. Back at the foot of the hill, we visited a small museum that illustrates native, pirate, and warring factions that have used this land.

The next day it seemed that half the Caribbean population had donned their most fashionable clothes and taken the shuttle bus to Pigeon Island. The crowds streamed in to sit under umbrellas shading them from the relentless sun. While the larger crowd occupied the field in front of the stage, another group preferred the side area around a secondary stage. A student band of steel drums played there inside the circle of food booths. Enormous screens gave a better-than life-sized view of the acts on stage. The Jazz Festival, managed by Paxton Baker of New York City, features jazz with a few local performers mixed in with visiting stars. The Pigeon Island shows run Saturday and Sunday from two in the afternoon until well after dark. The festival attracts big names to perform and in 2007, Natalie Cole closed the show.

POSTSCRIPT

Three months after our visit, the system put in place to protect the East Winds' Steinway grand piano got a test when Hurricane Dean roared through the Caribbean.

Assistant general manager of East Winds, Pearl Rambally, told me by phone that guests pitched in and helped the staff move all the furniture out of the dining room and bar area and rooms close to the sea.

Although water entered the dining room and trees and branches fell, Gareth Leach reported in an e-mail, "The piano was protected by a cover provided by Steinway, just like the waterproof jackets used on race horses in training on a wintry dull day in England on the gallops."

By noon the next day, the dining room was back in business and the Steinway was ready to play. "Everyt'ing gonna be al-l-right."