

Annandale Falls



Temptation Island

Rich with natural beauty and alluring offerings (can you say 180-proof rum?), the small island nation of Grenada ought to be a top vacation destination. But it isn't — yet.
By Necee Regis

"I can resist everything but temptation," reads the hand-painted slogan above the kitchen at BB's Crabback Caribbean Restaurant in Grenada.

BB is Brian Benjamin, a London-trained chef who learned traditional Caribbean cooking as a young boy in his grandmother's Grenadian home. Benjamin's waterfront restaurant is at the far end of Wharf Road, which rims the leeward-facing harbor in the capital city of St. George's. This part of town, also referred to as the Carenage, is packed with seafaring and commercial businesses and with prim, European-style government buildings dating back to the early nineteenth century.

Wandering into BB's is like entering the home of friends — ones who can cook really well. It's hard to imagine a more enthusiastic chef or a better spot to enjoy Grenadian dishes such as callaloo soup (callaloo is like spinach but heartier), barbecued lambi (conch), and piquant goat curry with coconut milk.

When I enter the restaurant, Benjamin's wife, Anna, seats me at a table looking out on the harbor. But several queries about the menu later, I find myself standing near the kitchen, at a counter overflowing with locally grown fruits, vegetables, and herbs.

"The fresher, the better — that's the most important thing!" says Benjamin, who bounds from his post behind the stove to give an impromptu lesson on Caribbean food. Soon, I'm smelling, touching, and tasting a sampling of the island's abundant offerings: yams, cocoa, plantains, limes, ginger, lemongrass, coffee, tamarinds, peppers, sweet bananas, okra, thyme, nutmeg, borden leaf, coconuts, and callaloo.

With such a wide array of exports, it's no wonder Grenada is known as the Spice Island (although based on Benjamin's sampler menu, the fruit and vegetable island would be a fair moniker as well). But in my experience, this tropical island, located just south of the Grenadines and 100 miles north of Venezuela, could just as easily be referred to as the lush rain forest island, the isle of pristine beaches, the chocolate lover's paradise, the rum drinker's heaven, the home of abundant waterfalls, the land of gracious hospitality, or the island of clear skies, sweet dreams, and reveries.

Yet for all its luxuries, Grenada's tourism

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TRAVEL

industry still lags behind that of its neighbors. This is partly due to the social upheaval and government changes of the early 1980s — which scared away some business — and to a singular focus on the thriving spice industry, which alone employed and sustained the island's population for many years. Locals like to boast that until recently, Grenada was second only to Indonesia as the largest producer of nutmeg in the world.

But Hurricane Ivan put an end to that when it decimated the island's orchards in 2004. With the nation's farmland in disrepair and eight years needed to restore it to full productivity, Grenada turned its attention to tourism. Though long overdue, this tardy shift has brought a new, modern mind-set to the island's development. Many of the latest buzzed-about industry trends are represented, including eco-friendly tourism, spa hotels, and organic architecture, which complements — rather than dominates — the natural landscape. Today, a stable and friendly atmosphere prevails, and Grenada is poised, thanks to a well-considered series of public and private developments, to become the next tourist hot spot in the eastern Caribbean.

GRENADA IS the largest of a three-island state that also includes Carriacou and Petite Martinique. On my excursion, I explore only the main island, where most of the nation's population resides. Though Grenada is relatively small at just 21 miles long by 12 miles wide, there are plenty of places amid the island's varied terrain to hike, swim, eat, and relax — from the heights of the tropical rain forest to secluded coral reefs to the sheltered white sands of Grand Anse Beach to Atlantic mangrove habitats.

My curiosity leads me first to Grand Etang National Park and Forest Reserve, where I find Grand Etang, a 13-acre lake nestled in an extinct volcanic crater. My ears pop as my car climbs the winding road to more than 1,700 feet above sea level. The volcano's steep hillside, a dense tangle of Technicolor foliage that drops down to the shimmering Caribbean Sea, is such a vibrant green in the midday sun that I remove my sunglasses to make sure I'm not hallucinating. I'm not. Amid the thick flora, I can see red cocoa pods swaying against shiny oval leaves and competing branches

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laden with nutmeg, breadfruit, goso, and jelly coconuts. Around a bend, a majestic silk cotton tree dominates the landscape — its almost silvery knotted and gnarled trunk leaving no question as to why it's sometimes called a devil tree.

If You Go

Grenada is located just 1,500 miles from Miami. American Eagle has one flight per day to Grenada, from San Juan; American Airlines is scheduled to begin nonstop service from Miami in November. For more information on the island, check the Grenada Board of Tourism site: www.grenadagrenadines.com.



Where to Stay

Mount Cinnamon
Grand Anse, St. George's
(473) 439-4400
www.mountcinnamongrenada.com
One-bedroom villas: \$500 to \$600
Colorful boutique resort with 21 spacious suites and villas set above Grand Anse Beach. Poolside cocktail bar and restaurant, plus Moi Spa and beach club.

Bel Air Plantation Resort
St. David's Point
(473) 444-6305
www.belairplantation.com
One-bedroom cottages: \$275 to \$350
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Where to Eat

BB's Crabback Caribbean Restaurant
Progress House, St. George's
(473) 435-7058
www.bbscrabback.com
Entrées: \$16 to \$40
Authentic Caribbean cuisine featuring curry dishes, callaloo soup, and the signature crabback, with views of the harbor and the Carenage.

Savvy's at Mount Cinnamon
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As the temperature veers above 80 degrees, I detour for a swim in the Grand Etang's crystalline waters, easily accessible beneath the Annandale Falls. Though other waterfalls within the park are more removed from the cruise-ship crowds, they can be reached only via hiking, which can be strenuous. For a short pit stop on a hot day, Annandale's 50-foot falls are sublime.

After a quick dip, I head back to my car. In the parking lot, native women are balancing baskets of fruit on their heads, vying for photo ops in exchange for tourist dollars. Men and reed-thin boys hawk necklaces made of dried seeds and herbs and sell ice-cold bottled water and Coke.

I drive higher up the mountain, and as I pass the 1,910-foot marker, the Atlantic

Ocean comes into view. Anxious to see some mona monkeys, I park near a shopping village and wander around, armed with a camera and some bananas I purchased in the lively Market Square in St. George's. Alas, a Grenadian man perched on a nearby fence tells me that a pack of monkeys just gobbled dozens of bananas and hightailed it back to the forest. The little beggars are sated for the time being.

After hiking near Grand Etang with the peak of Mount Qua Qua visible in the distance, I drive the twisting roads down toward the Atlantic Ocean and head south to sample some rum.

Before long, I arrive at Grenada's West-hall Rum Distillery. This local distillery began operating in the late 1700s; it was first run by a Frenchman and then by a Scot who grew sugar cane, cocoa, coconuts, and limes on the 951-acre estate. Today, rusting water-wheels, motor parts, boiling vats, and other equipment pieces lie scattered across the grassy hillside like marble fragments in the Roman Forum. Arthur Bain is the historian, tour guide, and keeper of the estate (which continues to distill alcohol into rum). Thin and rangy, with a quick smile and white hair, Bain strolls the property and explains the process of rum production.

"Quality is dictated by how you boil it, what water you use, what kind of yeast, how you ferment it," he says, pointing out two distillation chimneys, one from the late 1700s and the other from the late 1970s. Inside a small stone building, a museum filled with artifacts reveals more about the history of the estate, the island, and the rum-making process. After Bain's tour, we are able to taste some of the offerings, including the potent 180-proof Jack Iron.

I return to St. George's as the sun is setting. The houses and churches balanced on the hill above the Carenage turn to glowing, waxy shapes in the honey-toned evening light. The harbor waters dim to a flat slate blue, signaling the end of the day. Back at BB's Craback, I dip my fork in the signature dish — fresh crabmeat baked in the back of its shell with wine, herbs, and cheese — and contemplate the slogan on the wall.

When it comes to the temptations of Grenada, I decide, I am powerless to resist. **AW**

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