

TRAVEL

NATURAL FEATURES



MARJIE LAMBERT/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

EERIE LANDSCAPE: Parts of Curacao look like a desert with all the cactus. Mt. Christoffel is in the background.

Exploring the wonders of the Caribbean

BY JAY CLARKE
Special to the Miami Herald

A Caribbean getaway prompts visions of steel drum music, palm-lined beaches, elegant accommodations and a laid-back vacation. But the Caribbean has another aspect that may intrigue travelers: its unusual natural features.

Many Caribbean islands have unique features that even seasoned travelers will find fascinating. Some

are easily accessible, some not, but all will give you a different perspective of the Caribbean.

Many of these sights are offered on land or cruise tours; a couple require going on your own or with a guide.

BARBADOS

Many Caribbean islands have caves, but Harrison's Cave in Barbados is exceptionally large and has all the

elements of the world's most famous caves. Stalactites hang from the ceilings, stalagmites rise up from the ground. You'll see emerald pools, underground waterfalls, water running amid crystal formations, quirky rock shapes, and large and small caverns, including the Great Hall with its 100-foot-high ceiling.

The limestone cave sys-

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tem lies in the island's uplands at an elevation of 700 feet and is at least a mile in extent. It is named for Thomas Harrison, who owned land in the area in the 1700s. It was discovered in 1647 but was not explored and mapped until the 1970s, and not developed for the public until 1981.

Best of all for visitors, it is easily accessible — guests are driven through the cave in electrically operated trams that make photo stops at several points. Cost is \$30 adults, \$15 for children. www.harrisonscave.com.

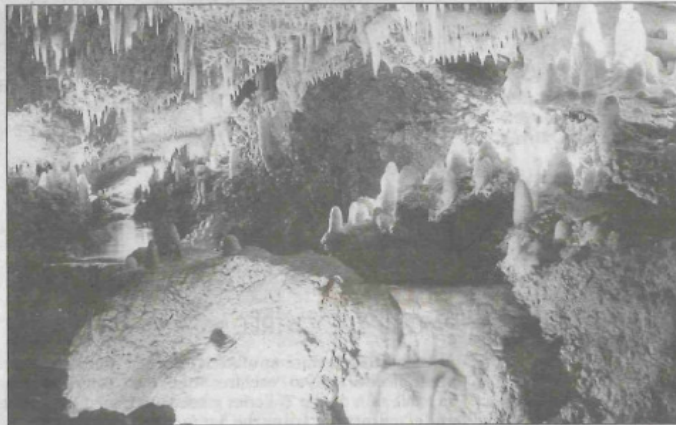
PUERTO RICO

In the water, said one visitor in a TripAdvisor message board, it was like "thousands of lighted sparkles following your movements ... absolutely the neatest thing to experience!" She was referring to her visit to bioluminescent Mosquito Bay on Puerto Rico's island of Vieques. The waters in this bay are filled with tiny luminescent creatures that light up when the waters are stirred up at night.

Puerto Rico has two other bioluminescent bays. One is in Fajardo not far from San Juan, the other in La Parguera on the southern coast. The Vieques bay has the most luminescence, followed by Fajardo. La Parguera has the least. A variety of tours is available to all three sites. For some choices, click on www.vieques.com/island-bioluminescent-bay/; www.puertoricodaytrips.com/fajardo-bio-bay/; www.puertoricodaytrips.com/la-parguera-bio-bay/.

CURACAO

When you think of the Caribbean, you probably picture tropical rainforests and lush vegetation. But when you visit Christoffel Nation-



GOING DEEP: Harrison's Cave in Barbados has stalactites, stalagmites, underground waterfalls, water running amid crystal formations, quirky rock shapes and large and small caverns.



UP IN THE CLOUDS: Dominica's Boiling Lake bubbles atop a volcanic fumarole.

al Park in the western part of Curacao, you may think you've been transported to Arizona. The landscape in this arid region looks more like Arizona's desert country than a stereotypical Caribbean vista.

You'll see candelabra-shaped cacti up to 20 feet high, century plants (agave) with their tall central shoots, wind-blown divi-divi trees, prickly pears and aloe. You

may run across wild goats and donkeys as well as land iguanas, which are prized by locals for their supposed aphrodisiac qualities. You also may spot petroglyphs left by pre-Columbian Arawak culture.

You can experience the park by car, on a guided tour, or on hiking trails. Park admission is \$12 adults, \$4.50 children 6-12. www.christoffelpark.org.

ST. LUCIA

It's called a "drive-in volcano," even though you actually don't drive into the volcano. But you get pretty close. Tour buses and private cars drive to a parking lot within a couple hundred yards of the caldera of the La Soufriere Volcano. Then you walk to the edge of the crater to look down into the caldera.

It's no Yellowstone and there's no lava, but you'll see boiling mud, steam vents and fumaroles, and a lot of color deposited by minerals such as iron, sulfur and copper oxide. N.B: You'll never forget the yucky sulfurous smell.

You can drive yourself there or take a tour such as the Volcano Highlight tour offered by Island Routes Caribbean Adventures, www.islandroutes.com. Cost is \$80.

GRAND CAYMAN

An easy drive along the southern coast of Grand Cayman will get you to two unusual natural features.

You can observe and take photos of blow holes. These are geyser-like expulsions of water and spray produced when waves roll into L-shaped holes in rocks along the shore and explode upward. The holes are located on the main road between Frank Sound and East End; there's a free parking lot at the site.

Also on this coast, near Bodden Town, are shore caves where Caribbean pirates once hid their treasures. One of them now is a commercial attraction with a gift shop and petting zoo and is accessible to all ages. Never mind that the "treasure chest in the cave" is a fake; the kids love it. However, the caves themselves — some of them now inaccessible — are genuine and pirates really did stash some of their loot in them. www.caymanactivityguide.com/Blowholes.htm; www.caymanactivityguide.com/PiratesCaves.htm.

DOMINICA

The second largest hot lake in the world is on this island, but it isn't easy to get to. It's a strenuous hike, even for those who are quite fit. Boiling Lake lies at an elevation of 2,300 feet atop a vol-

canic fumarole, so its grayish blue water literally boils and sends up clouds of steam.

The lake, about 200 feet across, was first sighted in 1870 and has undergone several fluctuations in level since. The water in the center of the lake is always boiling; at the edges it is near boiling.

The hike takes three hours each way, passing through a rainforest, along slippery paths and steep drop-offs down into and up out of the Valley of Desolation, where the lake is situated.

The reward for your arduous effort? Wonderful views of Dominica's rugged interior — and you'll own some really uncommon bragging rights. The hike should not be attempted without a guide, who can be booked at the starting point of the trail at Laudat or arranged for in Roseau. Cost is about \$55. Several tour agencies also offer the hike; ask in Roseau. www.avirtualdominica.com/thelake.cfm.

TRINIDAD

A lake of a totally different kind is found in Trinidad. At 100 acres and up to 300 feet deep, Pitch Lake is the world's largest lake of asphalt. Discovered by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1595, the lake has become a tourist attraction in Trinidad despite its drab surface, which looks like wrinkled elephant skin. Cashew, mango and breadfruit trees surround the lake.

Visitors actually can walk on certain parts of the lake, which is at the village of La Brea, about two hours by car from Port-au-Spain. Tar from the lake has been used to pave roads in more than 50 countries.

Guided tours are available from Port of Spain, the Trinidad capital. Admission to the lake is \$30 adult, \$12 children under 12. Click on www.gotrinidadandtobago.com, search for "pitch lake."