



[EXPERIENCES]

TAKING A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

*Sometimes adventure is trying something that's completely novel, which is exactly what writer **Christy Spring** experiences on the island of St Lucia, where she immerses herself in breathwork and wellness on a BodyHoliday retreat*

4,218

Miles from London to Castries, St Lucia

27° C

Average annual temperature

187

Bird species in St Lucia

TROUBLE SLEEPING, **DECISION** paralysis, scattiness, fear of failure. Anything else I should add to the list?" I swivel my head to look at my partner.

"This feels like a trap," he responds. Although it might seem like I'm establishing the groundwork for World War III, it's a sincere question. I'm compiling a list of issues I want to work on in a one-to-one session at BodyHoliday – an all-inclusive wellness retreat in St Lucia, which avows that if I give them my body for a week, they'll give me back my mind. As the daughter of a psychotherapist and someone who has had more CBT than hot dinners, I understand >

Words by
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📷 Corinne Kutz

NO SHRUBS: *The tropical rainforest that covers St Lucia, with the peaks of The Pitons on the horizon – two towering mountainous volcanic spires*



> the importance of knowing oneself. It's life's most valuable currency. So, armed with a list of problems, a suitcase full of sports bras and enough factor 50 for Count Dracula to daywalk, I embark on the eight-hour flight and an adventure of self-discovery.

As you swoop into St Lucia by plane, you're presented with the island's dramatic topography, a fuzzy green disc pierced with The Pitons – two herculean volcanic spires. A thick layer of cumulus cloud hangs over the island like a halo. We drive to the village of Gros Islet on the northern tip of St Lucia, and that same halo rather unceremoniously dumps its load onto the ground, just as we're told we're headed to the driest, hottest part

of the island. This kind of downpour is to be expected at these humid tropical latitudes, and in general the weather in St. Lucia is far less turbulent than other Caribbean locales, fortunate to dodge the furious hurricanes that circle up the coast and torment islands like the Bahamas, Cuba and the Dominican Republic with greater frequency.

Upon arrival, we're handed a turmeric shot and cold lemon towel, and it takes a brief snoop around the grounds to understand that this is the kind of place where humans metamorphose from stressed, angsty caterpillars into calm, level-headed butterflies. Having since discovered that Amy Winehouse checked in for a fortnight

and didn't leave for months, it fits the picture. The whole resort is edenic, sporting a thick floral jacket, and there's hardly an inch that isn't teeming with wildlife. Zenaida doves coo from blousy [bougainvilleae](#). Crabs scuttle along the crescent beach abutting the resort, and thick waxy-leaved monstera

Bougainvilleae is a tropical flowering vine native to the coast of Brazil. There are now over 300 varieties of the drought-tolerant plant that can grow up to 30ft feet tall

philodendron scale gnarly 100-foot-tall trees. It's the kind of place that puts your houseplants to shame.

On the menu here you'll find wellness, but perhaps not the type you're familiar



with. BodyHoliday refuses to nanny you; it's your call whether you indulge in the cornucopia of buffet spreads, exercise classes, or tiki cocktails (or all of them), leaving you with habits you've forged of your own volition. The absence of cryotherapy chambers, electroacupuncture, flotation tanks, and gong-smashing indicates that the rulebook is not being rewritten here. It's simply a sun-soaked refuge bountiful with movement, food, laughter and booze. It seems like the perfect soft launch into wellness for a food writer such as myself, who wraps up most holidays feeling like the human embodiment of a skip.

This retreat is a veteran in the wellness

world. Previously the residence of the manager of the Rolling Stones, it was transformed from a hedonistic hovel into a health haven in the 1980s – a time when wellness existed on the fringes of society and discussions of hot yoga, reformer pilates, and sound bathing were not the status quo. The concept of wellness and self-care was still in its nascent phases, born just 30 years prior as a medical term used to convey the positive aspects of health people could achieve beyond simply staving off illness. Curiously, despite wellness garnering a reputation of self-indulgence in recent years, what initially drove the movement was philanthropy – grounded in the idea that you can't adequately take on the problems of others without taking care of yourself.

I'm still dubious that my daily ayurvedic treatments, sunrise swims, and tubing (being dragged in a rubber ring by a motor boat) qualify as an act of national service, but either way, I head up to my room in a colonaded villa atop a steep hill to browse the throng of activities on offer. It reminds me of perusing a dim sum menu; you're faced with 30-odd options, keen to try something new and eager to tick off more things than you can possibly take on. Swapping siu mai, cheung fun, and har gau for sunrise hikes, tai chi, and beach boot camp, I set my alarm for the crack of 6am, ready to cosplay Jane Fonda.

I start with a breathwork workshop hosted by the founder of SOMA Breath, Niraj Naik, in a glass-walled box girdled by dense foliage, aptly called the treehouse. The promise of breathwork is enticingly straightforward: breath is the key to physical health, inner peace, improved performance, and self-actualisation. Intentionally regulating your breathing is no new phenomenon; Chinese qigong, Hawaiian piko piko, and Indian yogic breathing called pranayama have existed for centuries. We're informed that it's foolish to control your mind with your mind and that you should instead control it with your

**IT'S FOOLISH TO CONTROL YOUR MIND
WITH YOUR MIND, YOU SHOULD INSTEAD
CONTROL IT WITH YOUR BODY**



SHIPSHAPE: [from above] Papaya trees; a BodyHoliday sailboat; [left] a beach at BodyHoliday

body – a premise that deeply resonates with an insomniac who tries to furiously think her way into slumber (to no success, obviously).

We start with a body-shaking breathing exercise, which I'm told is a great way to shrug off stress. We jump up and down, shake our arms, and make a humming sound on the exhale. You can immediately scout out the Brits in the room because we're practically recoiling with embarrassment. We then move onto the hardcore side of breathwork, the psychedelic stuff that requires digging deep and allegedly helps you explore an alternate state of consciousness. We start with conscious connected breathing, a technique that involves breathing with no pause between inhalation and exhalation. I'm instructed to breathe up through my sphincter (fetchingly called the bliss pump) and then, for periodic >

WE DRINK SEVERAL GLASSES OF THE ALARMINGLY NAMED BUT DELICIOUS-TASTING CLITORAL WATER

> intervals, to hold my breath for as long as I can to the soundtrack of what I can only describe as a yogi club remix.

Holding your breath for prolonged periods like this requires a surprising amount of mental resilience. Resisting the urge to listen to your diaphragm as it spasms, begging you to breathe as you refuse to inhale, is at best uncomfortable and at worst panic-inducing. If you do manage to ride out the discomfort, you're plunged into an intense psychedelic experience not far off the effects of psilocybin or laughing gas. I'm no bohemian, but I see vivid colours and a vibrating pulse that feels like an electrical current flushes from my chest to my extremities in a coruscating shimmer. In this state, you gain access to higher thoughts and acquire mental clarity on issues you've been squirrelling away in the dusty filing cabinets of your mind (including that subscription you forgot

to cancel). It's not exactly one size fits all – one participant started weeping when we finished the session, divulging that she'd experienced visions of her lost ancestors giving her reassurance that life was going to be alright. Another confessed he was plunged into a racy, sexually aroused state. The woman next to me? In a deep slumber, snoring for the duration.

As it happens, we're not the only ones at the property working on our gas exchange. I hike up a steep hill in the cloying heat to a wild, tangling garden with Damian Adjodha – the horticultural leader of BodyHoliday's vegan Rastafarian restaurant ITAL. He talks me through the delicate ecosystem of edible plants he's cultivated here, building rows of dry stone walls pitted with succulents that prevent the volatilisation of carbon dioxide from the soil – an unfortunate consequence of the hotter, drier climate in this part of the

island, that's soon to get exacerbated by atmospheric warming. "It's like breathwork for the land," he laughs.

I proceed to follow him around the terraced gardens like an obedient pup, sniffing every leaf or flower he passes to me: a peppery curry leaf, followed by fragrant makrut lime and then some fuzzy Cuban oregano. He points out the moringa, a flower with a sharp aftertaste whose leaves are packed with more iron than most leafy green vegetables; the **pigeon pea**, a protein source which has sustained the St Lucian population during times of hardship; and

The **pigeon pea** is a legume related to chickpeas and packs a powerful nutritional punch with 11g of protein and more than 110% of the daily recommended intake of iron

the prickly soursop, used as both a meat substitute and ingredient in chemotherapy drugs.

As we wind through the plots, hummingbirds hover above the moringa and poke their

whisper-thin beaks into the trumpeted flowers. There's an abundance of lacquered aubergines, hands of bananas, and bulging papayas – many of which have cropped up by accident, planted by the birds whose stomach acid turns the seeds into fruit-bearing females. We finish the ascent up to the restaurant, thighs burning, and arrive at a wooden shack sheltering a large table overlooking the Coubaril Valley. We tuck into five courses of vegan Rastafarian food accompanied by the drone of crickets and several glasses of the alarmingly named but delicious-tasting clitoral water – a fuchsia-hued concoction better known as concentrated butterfly pea flower mixed with dry champagne.

Damian's encyclopaedic knowledge of plants and their often medicinal qualities is no coincidence. It comes from his Rastafarian heritage, a religious and political movement born in Jamaica at the turn of the 19th century. When African slaves were emancipated from their enslavers, indentured Indian immigrants were shipped to Jamaica in 1845 to fill their space on plantations, fostering a



WELL HEALED: [left] The sun-soaked courtyard at the BodyHoliday's extensive Wellness Centre



FRIENDS WITH ZENEFITS: [above] Hatha yoga on the beachside Hibiscus Deck at BodyHoliday

cultural intermingling between oppressed peoples and sparking up the beginnings of Rastafarianism, which then blazed across the Caribbean. Despite being better known for dreadlocks, reggae, ganja, and, of course, Bob Marley, these were the people who pioneered self-sufficiency and veganism long before Deliciously Ella. Exacerbated by WWII, food shortages became common across the Caribbean, which relied on shipments from Britain. Rastas turned to cultivating the land to feed themselves. Following the ITAL diet (which derives from the word vital) means eating food that's considered essential to life. In practical terms, it's following a regimen of whole, unprocessed and natural produce that's free from chemicals, additives and animals. It's both a spiritual and pragmatic matter for rastas – eat well, and you might need fewer trips to the doctor.

Although it sounds a little hocus pocus, this holistic approach to managing your health at BodyHoliday is its main allure. Being 'healthy' is a complex state that

doesn't exist in a vacuum; it's far more than crunching for a six-pack or chugging juices to shed timber. The body is a pleasure generator, and sleep, movement, food and social interactions all amount to the fuel you're putting inside this engine. Listening to my inner mechanics, I throw myself into the final days here, running from ayurvedic hot oil massages (called abhyanga) and pilates to sunrise hikes and sunset swims, ensuring that I consume copious buffet spreads alongside umbrella-festooned cocktails during the intervals.

My final hurrah is **hatha yoga** on the hibiscus deck, accompanied by the gentle lapping of the Caribbean sea and a hazy view of Martinique on the horizon. Contorting my body into an origami mishmash of poses, I hold my feet with my hands in 'happy baby' pose, feeling as vulnerable as a wishbone poised for snapping. As our legs twinge our instructor Mya talks to us about a yoga mantra: to be one's own doctor. Not in the sense of self-diagnosing via WebMD, but rather that it's valuable to study your body, its capabilities, and what feels right – no one else can do the homework as well as you.

It would be remiss not to mention

Hatha yoga is usually a slow paced practice where poses, called asana, are held for a few breaths. In Sanskrit, 'ha' represents the sun and 'tha' the moon

that wellness has become increasingly inaccessible, and in its often problematic (and impossible) pursuit of perfect health, it can be downright miserable.

The beauty of this

place is that it doesn't pursue perfection but instead focuses on what's realistic. In other words, they don't try to convince you that there's something wrong with you. I'm leaving with an understanding of what feels good in my mind and body that costs me nothing to implement in my everyday life. I know breathing techniques to lull me to sleep or calm me down when I'm paralysed in an anxious frenzy. I no longer wince at the thought of morning exercise, and I've found joy in moving alongside total strangers. Am I leaving looking like Cara Delevingne? No. Have I developed the serene temperament of the Dalai Lama? Unconfirmed. Will I continue to breathe through my bliss pump? Over my dead body. Have I developed a fresh zest for life? Absolutely. ♦

Find out more at bodyholiday.com