



Muddy Waters

Eva Leonard leaves St. Lucia's beaches behind for off-road biking in a tropical jungle

It's difficult tearing myself away from my room, a loft-like Caribbean fantasy partially open to the gentle elements, with panoramic views of the twin peaks of St. Lucia's Pitons and the ocean.

Outside, I make my way down the hundred stone steps that lead through the various levels of Anse Chastanet, past the resort's airy restaurants and bars to the beach.

There I meet my jungle biking guide, Mike, and we hop into a brightly painted wooden speedboat. It will take us to Anse Mamin, Anse Chastanet's sister beach: small, private and bordering a tropical jungle and the grounds of an early colonial plantation.

After a quick, sun-splashed ride, we scramble up the beach to a long, high wall. Mike pulls open an enormous wooden door, and the vista changes dramatically: We are in the jungle, surrounded by a dizzying assortment of trees and plants bearing coconut, banana, avocado, almond, mango, guava, lime, pineapple and aloe. There are teak, banyan, mimosa, calabash and African tulip trees, with showy red blossoms.

The bike trail is a muddy, pitted path weaving through the lush vegetation.

Soaked in bug spray and sun block, I follow Mike to the rustic, wood-hewn off-road biking center. I'm fitted for a Cannondale suspension bike and a helmet, and Mike shows me how to brake properly so I don't go hurtling over the handlebars as our bikes take the steep dips of the trail.

We begin pedaling, swerving to avoid or pop over the big tree roots and rocks protruding from the mud, and aim for the wooden planks that take us across streams and ditches. The trail is varied and twisting, and paying attention is key lest you wind up face down in the mud or in a painful tête-à-tête with a banyan tree. It's a workout, but a more daunting challenge is within view.

Mike points up through the fronds to a steep peak and Tinker's Trail: a lung, thigh- and calf-muscle punishing path etched vertiginously into the hillside. The ride is named after champion cyclist Tinker Juarez, the only person who's actually cycled all the way to the top, though many have been



humbled trying. Realists, we forgo the dare and instead stick to the main trail, which allows cyclists of different skill levels to pedal side by side, with a "path of least resistance" running parallel with a more challenging one.

History leaps out at us from beneath the vines and roots. We pass grim reminders of the past—the foundations of former slave quarters and of the overseer's house. Higher up are the ruins of a church (next to it, a slaves' graveyard) and higher still, steps cut into the rock by slaves. Nearby, the former home of a plantation owner has been overtaken by fruit bats that cluster on the ceiling and termites busy reducing the boards that barely hold it together to dust.

A moss-covered 18th-century reservoir built by the French runs along the trail. Nearby are crumbling buildings and machinery once used to process sugar, cocoa beans and coconuts. Inside the sugar mill ruins, rusted molasses vats are scattered among the weeds. Outside, looking like Captain Nemo's mini-submarines, rust-covered boilers circa 1840 lie half-buried in the mud. It is said that a flood destroyed these machines just before they were to replace the mill's water wheel, and they were never used.

At the end of our two-wheeled trip back in time, splattered with mud, we drop our bikes at the center. Leaving the jungle behind, I walk the few yards across the quiet beach to wash the mud from my legs and cool off in the Caribbean.

Anse Chastanet

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Rooms from \$220. Bike rental from \$39 for two hours.