

Sailing Dominica

Chartering off the beaten path

Story by Eric Vohr

Photos by Michaela Urban

As popular charter destinations get more and more crowded, I find myself searching for cruising destinations that are off the beaten path and relatively unexplored. Dominica in the Windward Islands is just that kind of place, and so worth exploring—both on water and on land.

There are a couple of reasons why Dominica (pronounced “Domineeka”) is off the mainstream cruising map. First, there are no bareboat charter companies here. Second, anchorages are more limited here than at other popular cruising spots like the BVIs. However, having recently sailed Dominica, I can safely say this is still a fantastic sailing destination, and a remarkable place to experience and explore.



Secret Beach, on Dominica's northwest shore, may not be a secret much longer (opposite); approaching Toucari Bay (above); the waterfall at Emerald Pool (middle)

The best place to pick up a charter is Guadeloupe and Martinique, Sunsail (sunsail.com) and Dream Yacht Charter (dreamyachtcharter.com) have bareboat charter bases on both islands. That means you have a long sail to get over to Dominica, but it also means you can include one of these other islands in your trip. And because former French colonies have the best provisioning—baguettes and croissants, good cheese and fantastic wine—these islands are not a bad place to start a cruise.

The west coast is really your only option for anchoring in Dominica, as the east coast is exposed to the rough Atlantic Ocean and has no good harbors. The southwest coast is too deep to anchor, but there are a lot of mooring balls in Roseau and Loubiere, both of which are great for inland excursions.

I recommend touring Morne Trois Pitons National Park. Comprised of 27 square miles of thick jungle, raging rivers, lush rainforest, deep gorges and volcanic fissures, this World Heritage Site is an eco-tourism paradise.

Champagne Beach is also fantastic, as the reefs here are stellar for snorkeling or diving. It's called Champagne Beach because of the numerous underwater fumaroles that bubble up through the ocean floor, making the water look like sparkling wine. You can either snorkel these crystal clear bubbling waters, or arrange a dive with one of the many scuba shops here.

This part of the island is also rich with a variety of sea mammals. I spotted numerous schools of sperm and pilot whales, and they also have pygmy whales, Atlantic spinner dolphins and spotted dolphins, so keep a sharp eye out while sailing.

Heading north, there's a good anchorage at Mero Beach (unless you have a northern swell). One of the few sand beaches on Dominica, there's an eclectic collection of fun beach bars and restaurants. For the most part, this is a low-key spot. However, the picturesque volcanic black sand here can attract a lot of tourists when a cruise ship is in port.

North of Mero, there are two mooring balls at Batalie Beach in front of the Sunset Bay Club Hotel and Restaurant. I haven't stayed there, but I've heard good things about the hotel and the restaurant, and very good things about the dive center.

Your next option for a harbor on your way north is Prince Rupert Bay, where you'll find great holding and a number of mooring balls in front of Indian River and Sisters Sea Lodge. If you decide to anchor in the southern end of the bay, be advised, it can be rolly.

A group called Portsmouth Area Yacht Services (PAYS) operates most of the moorings in Prince Rupert Bay, and they also run a legendary Sunday cruisers BBQ to encourage boats to anchor here and help pay for security.

One of the locals who work with PAYS, Andrew "Cobra" O'Brien, also runs a must-do guided trip up the Indian River—a lazy tidal river that was the setting for the a scene from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. This is a magical trip, as the Indian River winds its way deep into a sleepy jungle where green herons stalk tiny fish and crab among a maze of twisted gnarly mangrove roots. At the end of the cruise, Cobra has a little outpost where he serves up his local brew called "Dynamite." A few of these exotic cocktails and you might just start seeing pirates yourself.

North of Prince Rupert Bay is the Cabrits Marine Park. And while, in my opinion, it's the most beautiful part of the west coast, there's unfortunately no anchoring here. However, they're planning to install overnight mooring balls, so call ahead.

If you want a night off the boat, Dominica has some of the best eco-lodges in the Caribbean. My favorites are: Jungle Bay Resort, a collection of private bungalows crafted from recycled wood and perched on stilts above the savage Atlantic coastline; Rosalie Bay Resort, which has one of the largest sea turtle nesting beaches on the island; and Secret Bay Resort, with its luxury cabanas tucked in the jungle over a gorgeous private beach with a sea cave.

Dominica might not have the breadth of anchorages that you find in better-known cruising destinations, but it also doesn't have the crowds. That being said, I expect to see a lot of growth there in the upcoming years, so you might want to book this before it's discovered! **S**

CRUISE NOTES

WHERE TO STAY

Secret Bay/Caribbean Coast
secretbay.dm
767-445-4444

Jungle Bay/Atlantic Coast
junglebaydominica.com
767-446-1789

Rosalie Bay/Atlantic Coast
rosaliebay.com
767-446-1010

WHAT TO DO

Morne Trois Pitons National Park

Champagne Reef Dive & Snorkel
champagnereef.com

Indian River Tours
cobratours.dm

BAREBOAT CHARTERS

Sunsail
sunsail.com

Dream Yacht Charter
dreamyachtcharter.com

MOORINGS, ANCHORING, WATER, FUEL & CUSTOMS

Andrew Magloire
Chief Fisheries Officer
767-266-3000

Hubert Winston
Dominica Marine Association
767-275-2851/767-440-2628
info@dominicomarinecenter.com

Andrew 'Cobra' O'Brien
PAYS
767-245-6332/767-616-6332
cobratours@hotmail.com

OTHER SERVICES

Mechanic:
Ingna 767-277-9406

Canvas:
Junior 767-614-2291

Average Cost of Moorings: \$9