

JUNGLE ADVENTURE DOMINICA

Walking in Eden

With its towering palms, ancient tree ferns and a host of brilliantly coloured and improbably large flowers, Dominica is a garden of Eden. *BBC Wildlife* editor **Sophie Stafford** visited this little-known, pristine jungle wilderness for a one-to-one with nature.

I PEERED INTO a black, apparently bottomless cavern in the rainforest floor. The light was fading rapidly and I could hear a high-pitched squeaking and the leathery sound of sleep-cramped wings being stretched. "They are waking and getting ready to fly," whispered my guide Gary Shillingford. "Soon they will be emerging to hunt."

We were perched on the edge of Dominica's most impressive bat roost – an underground colony of thousands of endemic fruit bats *Brachyphylla cavernarum*. Their cave home, known as "Tou Santi" or Stinking Hole, turned out to be aptly named, belching warm, sulphurous and guano-laced fumes over us every few seconds. Grimacing, Gary pulled his t-shirt up to cover his mouth. As the chittering became more excited, a ghostly grey shape described a

figure of eight in the gloom of the cave mouth below us – but it didn't emerge. Then one bat, too impatient to wait for the others, darted up out of the hole, looped around the basin barely skimming the ground, and flew away into the darkening forest.

PEST CONTROL

Before long, the entire colony was awake and too many bats to count were swooping around the basin, their wings silent, their bodies a silver whirlpool. Despite their vast numbers and helter-skelter flight, the bats never came near us. As Gary started to slap at the mossies buzzing around our heads, he observed: "These mosquitoes won't be around for long. Mexican funnel-eared bats [*Natulus stramineus*] share the cave with the fruit bats and they keep the forest

clear of insects. If one lands on you, a bat may come and pluck it off." For once I was disappointed not to be subjected to the mossies' bloodthirsty attentions.

By now the bats were streaming from the cave mouth. It would take at least another hour for the whole colony to emerge and they would not return until 5am the next morning, so it was time to make our way back to the car park.

The walk to Stinking Hole (which is just beyond Dominica's tallest waterfall, the 62m-high Middleham Falls) is entrancing in daylight, but less friendly at night. The dense canopy smothered the moonlight and I couldn't see anything beyond the faltering beam of my torch. It was to be a long, slow journey home. On the way, the pin-prick green fairy lights of fireflies danced in the trees and enormous crickets

serenaded us with their sawing calls, but I was concentrating too furiously on my feet – or what little I could see of them – to appreciate these denizens of the night.

Dominica is a tiny island, only 48km long by 24km wide, yet it has a rich biodiversity. Most of its 750km² is protected nature reserves, with more than 100 rivers (though probably not the 365 boasted by tourist guides), 150km of coastline, 16 waterfalls and many mountains, four of which are over 1,200 metres high.

It also boasts an extraordinary diversity of habitats, from mossy, elfin cloudforest high on the peaks to dramatic coastal cliffs; from volcanic lakes to satiny black sand beaches. The island was created

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by volcanic action, which makes its presence felt through hundreds of hot sulphur springs, warm waterfalls, fumeroles (steaming, smoking vents and fissures) and the bubbling Boiling Lake (the world's second largest hot-water lake after New Zealand's Waimangu Cauldron).

NATURE ISLAND

Flying over Dominica in a small plane from Antigua, the first thing that struck me was its wildness – it truly was a jungle down there. From mountain ridge to plunging coastline, the island is cloaked in a dense, undulating, green blanket. Narrow ribbons of tarmac carve a path around the island, hugging the curves of every peak.

From my car, the impression of solid greenery continued, enlivened by the flame red of the

African tulip tree as well as the fuchsia pinks and bright oranges of forest flowers. Banana plantations are tucked into the edges of the rainforest, their fruits swaddled in blue plastic to protect them from covetous insects and birds and scorching by the sun.

WILD AT HEART

Dominica's wild interior is almost untouched by roads (which tend to skirt around the coast), but there are many walking trails that enable you to penetrate deep into the jungle. Here, in the heart of the rainforest, live giants – ancient trees that reach heights of 30 to 40 metres with girths of three to four metres. Their branches are cloaked with a soft green fuzz of clinging mosses and lichens, their trunks festooned with bromeliads, orchids and other epiphytes. Broadleaves brush leafy shoulders with massive tree ferns, whose vast, shady crowns put to shame those of their cousins huddled miserably in pots at home.

Local people are justifiably proud of their "nature island" and prize the trees not only for their impressive size, foliage and fruits, but also their medicinal properties. Every time I was introduced to a tree, my guide immediately mentioned its use in a salve or tea as a cure for headaches, nappy rash or some other sickness.

During my walk to Middleham Falls, I discovered that many of the trees have other uses, too. Native Carib people once used the huge buttressed roots of the Queen of the Forest to communicate with their companions in the forest. Thumping the heel of your hand on a skinny root creates a deep boom that travels through the trees.

The remarkably tall and straight gommý tree *Dacryodes excelsa* (a valuable source of timber) produces a white resinous gum, which ignites easily, producing a fragrant smell that keeps ▶

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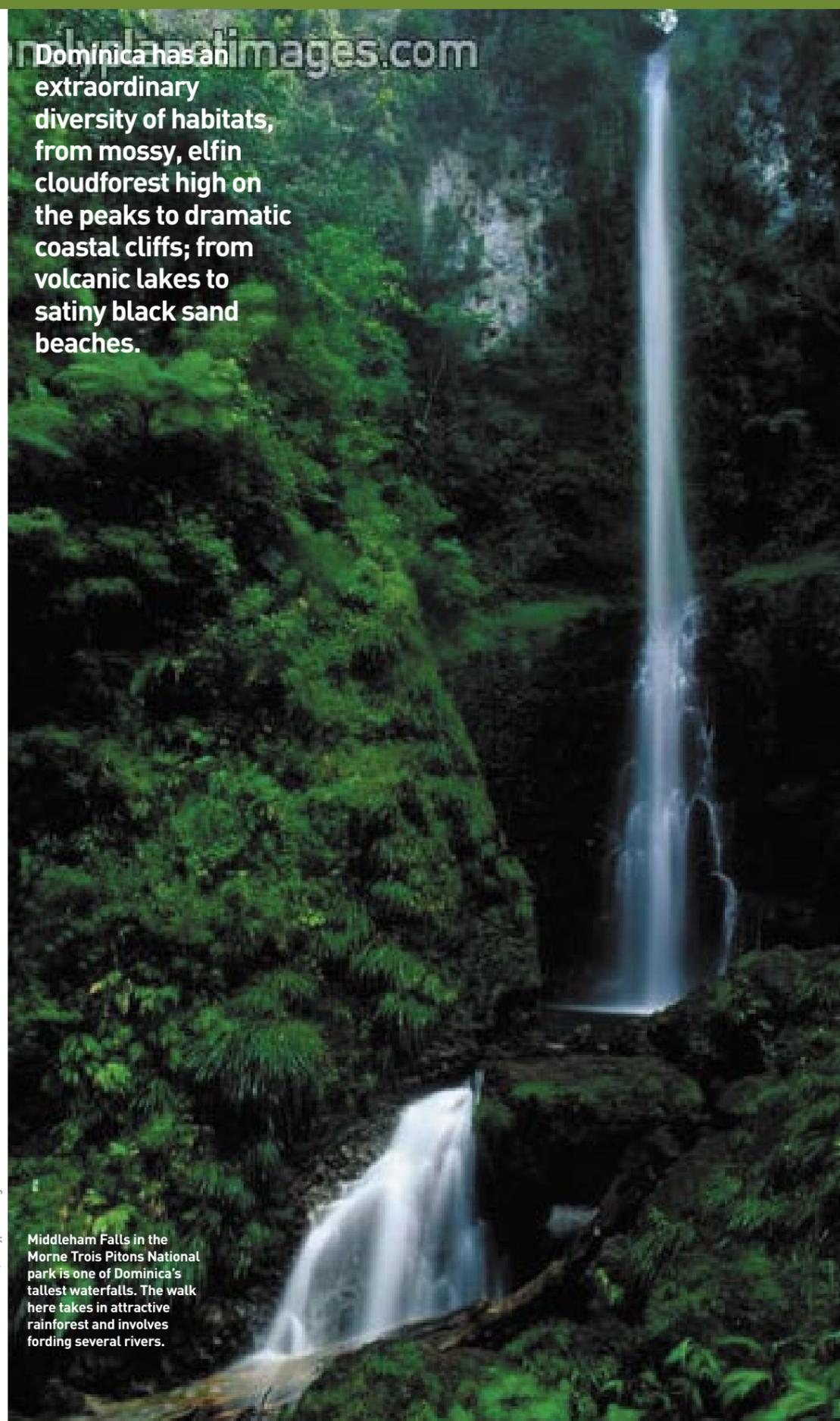
Sophie Stafford

At Jerry's Villa, I found this gorgeous pink *Calliandra tergemina* bush alive with three of Dominica's four species of hummingbird, including this stunning purple-throated carib.



Middleham Falls in the Morne Trois Pitons National park is one of Dominica's tallest waterfalls. The walk here takes in attractive rainforest and involves fording several rivers.

Michael Lawrence/loveplanetimages.com



DOMINICA Everything you need to know to plan your visit to the nature island of the Caribbean.

THE NAVIGATOR



LOCATION Dominica (pronounced "Dom-in-eeek-a") is an island nation located between the French islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Eastern Caribbean. It's a half-hour flight from Antigua or Barbados.
WHEN TO VISIT Dominica has a warm and humid atmosphere all year round.

Portsmouth
Visit the old fort at Cabrits National Park, take a boat up the Indian River and try snorkelling and diving with Cabrits Dive Centre.

Roseau
The capital is the base for many whale-watching and diving outfits and home to the botanical gardens. It also lies at the foot of many of the hiking trails and the aerial tram.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

- GETTING THERE**
Virgin Atlantic flies Gatwick to Antigua three times a week. Return economy fares start at £536 (inc tax). ☎ 08705 747 747; www.virgin-atlantic.com
British Airways flies Gatwick to Antigua five times a week April–October. Return economy fares start at £527 (inc tax). www.ba.com
BWIA flies Heathrow to Antigua twice a week. Return economy fares start at £490 (plus tax and fees). ☎ 0870 499 2942; www.bwia.co.uk
Caribbean Star flies Antigua to Dominica three times a day. Return fares start at £59. www.flycaribbeanstar.com
Liat flies Antigua to Dominica three times a day. Return fares start at £51. www.liatairline.com
- ACCOMMODATION**
Jungle Bay Resort & Spa
Email info@junglebaydominica.com; www.junglebaydominica.com
Fort Young Hotel, Roseau
Email gml@fortyounghotel.com; www.fortyounghotel.com
3 Rivers Eco Lodge
Email info@3riversdominica.com; www.3riversdominica.com
- Papillote Botanical Garden and Retreat, Roseau Valley**
Email papillote@papillote.dm; www.papillote.com
- THINGS TO DO**
Car hire is available but roads are steep and windy. Buses are unpredictable so hire a driver. I used Jon Vidal. Email jonvee_1@hotmail.com
Diving: Cabrits Dive Centre, Portsmouth, is Dominica's only PADI 5 Star Dive Centre and the only one located in the north of the island. www.cabritsdive.com
For an overview of all the island's dive operators, visit www.dominicawatersports.com
The Rainforest Aerial Tram operates daily 9am–2.30pm, October–March, and on cruise ship days (usually Tues) April–September. Cruise ship days can mean long queues. www.rainforestaerialtrams.com
Anchorage Whale Watch & Dive Centre, Roseau. A three hour tour departs 2pm, every Wed, Sat and Sun. www.anchoragehotel.dm
- MORE INFORMATION**
www.dominica.dm
www.natureisland.com

TOP SPECIES TO SEE



HUMMINGBIRDS
Dominica is host to four species of hummingbirds – the purple-throated Carib, green-throated Carib, Antillean crested and blue-headed.
WHERE These delightful birds are relatively easy to see. I spotted them feasting on impatiens in Roseau and fighting over pink, shaving brush *Calliandra* flowers at Jerry's Windsong Villa. Here, three species buzzed and whirred like miniature fighter pilots, oblivious to my presence and providing excellent photo opportunities.
CONTACT Stay at Jerry's Windsong Villa (email windsong@cwdom.dm) or ask Laura at Jungle Bay to organise your visit (see above).



TURTLES
From April to October, the pebble and sand beaches on Dominica's north and east coasts provide nesting sites for green, hawksbill and leatherback turtles. Loggerheads are also seen here but they don't nest.
WHERE Try the beaches at Castle Bruce or if you prefer an organised turtle-watch, join the wardens from the Rosalie Sea Turtle Initiative (RoSTI), who patrol the beaches at Rosalie and Bout Sable at La Plaine to protect the turtles from poachers.
CONTACT Rowan Byrne (RoSTI) email rowan@marinecreatures.com or visit www.marinecreatures.com



IGUANAS
The most magnificent reptile on Dominica is the 40cm-long Lesser Antillean iguana. The species was once abundant in the Eastern Caribbean, but went extinct on many islands. Dominica now supports the largest single population.
WHERE The iguanas are well dispersed and can be hard to find, but try looking for them in coastal forests, where they clamber around precariously in the treetops. They are sometimes spotted on the ground (as they do occasionally use burrows).
CONTACT You may see iguanas at the Hummingbird Inn. Visit www.find-us.net/hummingbird/



PARROTS
Dominica boasts two endemic parrots – the rare, endangered imperial parrot (or Sisserou as it is known locally) and the more abundant red-necked parrot (or jaco).
WHERE These large green parrots are mainly confined to the slopes of Morne Diablotin and are comparatively easy to see. Try the well-marked Syndicate Nature trail for a dedicated parrot-watch point. I also heard jacos chuckling on the Middleham Falls trail.
CONTACT Local bird expert Bertrand Jean-Baptiste ("Dr Birdy") runs birdwatching tours. Roseau's Botanical Gardens run a breeding programme with captive birds.



SPERM WHALES
Dominica is known as the whale-watching capital of the Caribbean. Its calm waters are an international hotspot for sperm whales, which can be seen all year round but are particularly prevalent when mating and calving between November and April. Deep channels run within 8km of the west coast so you can even see the whales from land.
WHERE Try Fort Shirley and west Cabrits, Soufriere village and Scott's Head. You may also see pilot whales and spotted, Fraser's and spinner dolphins.
CONTACT Anchorage Whale Watch, Roseau (see above) or Dive Dominica at Castle Comfort hotel. www.divedominica.com



Sophie Stafford

The Indian River meanders through buttress roots of the bloodwood tree *Pterocarpus officinalis* to its mouth on the south side of Portsmouth. Here, a guide will row you up to a riverside bar.

mosquitoes away. The leaves of the *Aspunda rigida* fern are shaped like a pair of fly wings and make a perfect rainproof shelter (in case you're ever caught in one of the island's warm, heavy showers) and the *Cecropia* tree can help you to predict the weather. When its large, five fingered leaves turn over to reveal their white undersides, bad weather is sure to follow.

GETTING FRUITY

The island's warm, humid climate also means that fruit trees – mangoes, breadfruits, grapefruits, bananas, guava, apricots the size of grapefruits, starfruits and coconuts – grow luxuriantly here. You can also find coffee and cocoa trees in the wild and – for the less adventurous – at Papillote Botanical Gardens. When I visited the gardens, I was preceded by a hungry opossum, which had scraped a hole in the side of one of the cocoa pods and sucked out the contents, leaving just a hollow husk. I was disappointed that the opossum itself was long gone. Dominica does not have a huge

array of mammal life – except for an impressive 12 species of bats – but you do stand a reasonable chance of seeing some of it, especially agoutis. This introduced, long-legged guinea pig-like animal is common in the forest, and often seen around dawn and dusk. I saw my first in broad daylight near the top station of the aerial tram (where they put out titbits) and later spotted another four on the Syndicate Nature Trail, bustling around doing whatever it is agoutis do before they go to bed.

One species I didn't see, however, was the mountain chicken. This confusingly named species is actually a large frog *Leptodactylus fallax*. Once abundant in the island's dry forest, the mountain chicken is now extremely rare due to the locals' taste for its meat (which is apparently like chicken, hence the name) and a disease that has swept through the remaining population. The Zoological Society of London is now developing a captive breeding programme on the island to help restore its numbers.

FIVE FANTASTIC FLOWERS

The plantlife on Dominica is truly phenomenal. Many of its most abundant blooms are large, brightly coloured and robust, and they grow along the road verges.

HELICONIAS

The fabulous, plasticky, lobster-clawed red and yellow flowers of *Heliconia bihai* are everywhere. This plant was once Dominica's national flower, but as it is shared with neighbouring islands, it was replaced by *Sabinea carinalis*, known locally as bwa kwaib. This small, demure tree has pea-like leaves and small, curled red flowers. You can see one in the botanical gardens at Roseau.



GINGER LILY

Clumps of vibrant ginger lilies adorn road verges all over the island. These attractive flowers come in striking shades of red and pink. The colourful inflorescence actually consists of large, waxy-looking bracts, while the real flowers – small, white and inconspicuous – are hidden inside. Its leaves are used in a tea to treat stomach complaints.

ANTHURIUM LILIES

The anthurium is one of Dominica's most characteristic flowers and often densely cloaks the rainforest floor. These beautiful flowers come in a variety of colours – pink, white, green and red, orange, green and even black. Papillote has specimens of many colours. As you start the walk to Middleham Falls, watch out for masses of blooming *Anthurium andraeanum* lilies just off the path.



BROMELIADS

Rainforest trees bristle with bromeliads. Many species are epiphytic, which means they attach themselves to tree trunks and branches, deriving moisture and nutrients from the air and rain. Their rosettes of strap-shaped, leathery, arching leaves produce colourful flower spikes. I took this photo of an earthbound species at Papillote Botanical Garden.



IMPATIENS

The road from Grand Bay to Roseau is worth a visit merely to take in the astonishing spectacle of blooming impatiens in myriad shades of pink. Here, the busy lizzies of home were transformed into a riot of colour, forming a veritable crash barrier of blooms. Stop now and again to look out for hummingbirds gathering around the flowerheads.



Top to bottom: Sue Cunningham/Alamy; Sophie Stafford x 4



Another hiker – not me – takes in the mountain vista from the hiking trail through cloudforest to Boeri Lake. The plaintive calls of the mountain whistler (or rufous-throated solitaire) ride the wind.

Other wildlife is more abundant. Everywhere you walk, the undergrowth rustles with tree and ground lizards going about their business. Their larger cousin, the iguana, can be harder to find as it likes to hang around in the tops of very tall trees, such as those along the Indian River, but I was lucky enough to spot not one but two – a large grey male and a slighter, emerald juvenile – crossing a road right in the middle of Portsmouth.

COME HIKE WITH ME

Not only has Dominica got more than its fair share of wildlife attractions, but it's keen to share them with visitors. This tiny island has more than 50 nature sites, accessible from an impressive

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network of hiking trails, and a host of astonishingly well-informed guides (an essential ingredient for a truly rewarding wildlife walk), all ready to share their natural treasures with you. The trails are, on the whole, well designed, with steps made out of non-slip fir tree trunks. Crossing rivers can be a bit hair-raising though, as bridges are relatively unheard of, meaning you

often have to scramble down banks over twisty tree roots into river gullies. Walks classified as 'moderately difficult' will be a good workout for most people as the island's mountainous terrain means plenty of long, steep climbs. Insiders tell me that a range of different trails are being developed so that families and anyone who enjoys being close to wildlife without working up a sweat can have the best of both worlds.

Many of Dominica's hotels have also been sensitively developed with nature in mind, yet still offer luxurious accommodation. I was based at Jungle Bay, where wooden cottages perch on stilts in pristine rainforest overlooking the ocean. Each night, I went to sleep

serenaded by a choir of tiny 'tink' frogs and awoke each morning to a joyous cacophony of birdsong and streaming sunlight. There's also camping and cabins at the 3 Rivers Eco-Lodge, which has won awards for its sustainability.

One of Dominica's main attractions is undoubtedly its lack of tourists. There are no direct transatlantic flights, so the island is not yet swamped by mass tourist invasions (apart from the passengers on the cruise ships, who rarely travel far from Roseau's less active attractions). You can lose yourself in Dominica's secret wild places and see no one for hours, with only the chuckling of jacos parrots overhead and bustling agoutis for company.

So experience this natural jewel of the Caribbean before everyone else discovers it.



Sophie Stafford is editor of *BBC Wildlife* and loves wild jungles. She wishes Bristol was as blessed with bromeliads and iguanas.

FURTHER READING

- Dominica – 1 Guide to Geology, Climate and Habitats; 2 Wildlife Checklists; 3 Guide to Birdwatching; 4 Guide to Dive Sites and Marine Life; 5 Illustrated Flora; 6 Agriculture & the Environment; 7 Guide to Nature Sites; 8 Nature Map.**

by Peter GH Evans & Arlington James (Ministry of Tourism). Buy these books direct from the Dominica High Commission. Call 0207 370 5194/5; email highcommission@dominica.co.uk

WIN A HOLIDAY TO DOMINICA

Do you want to follow in Sophie's footsteps and discover the delights of the nature island of the Caribbean?

We've got a fabulous five night holiday on Dominica to giveaway, courtesy of Fort Young Hotel and Caribtours.

One lucky *BBC Wildlife* reader will win two scheduled return flights from London Gatwick to Dominica, airport transfers, five nights accommodation at Dominica's flagship hotel Fort Young

Hotel and two island tours, courtesy of KHATT Tours.

Fort Young is a luxurious hotel in the heart of the island's capital, Roseau, a perfect base for exploring the island. You can also choose two trips from a variety of different walks and island tours.

HOW TO WIN

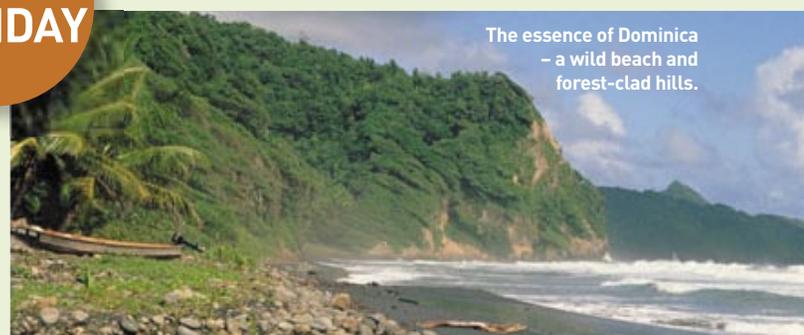
To win this fantastic holiday please

send a postcard with your name and address to: **Dominica Holiday Giveaway**, *BBC Wildlife*, 14th Floor, Tower House, Fairfax Street, Bristol BS1 3BN. (for terms and conditions see page 95).



There can be only one lucky winner, so Caribtours are also offering *BBC Wildlife* readers a special price on a 7-night holiday in Dominica. For details, call 0207 751 0660, email escapes@caribtours.co.uk, www.caribtours.co.uk quoting BBCW06.

The essence of Dominica – a wild beach and forest-clad hills.



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