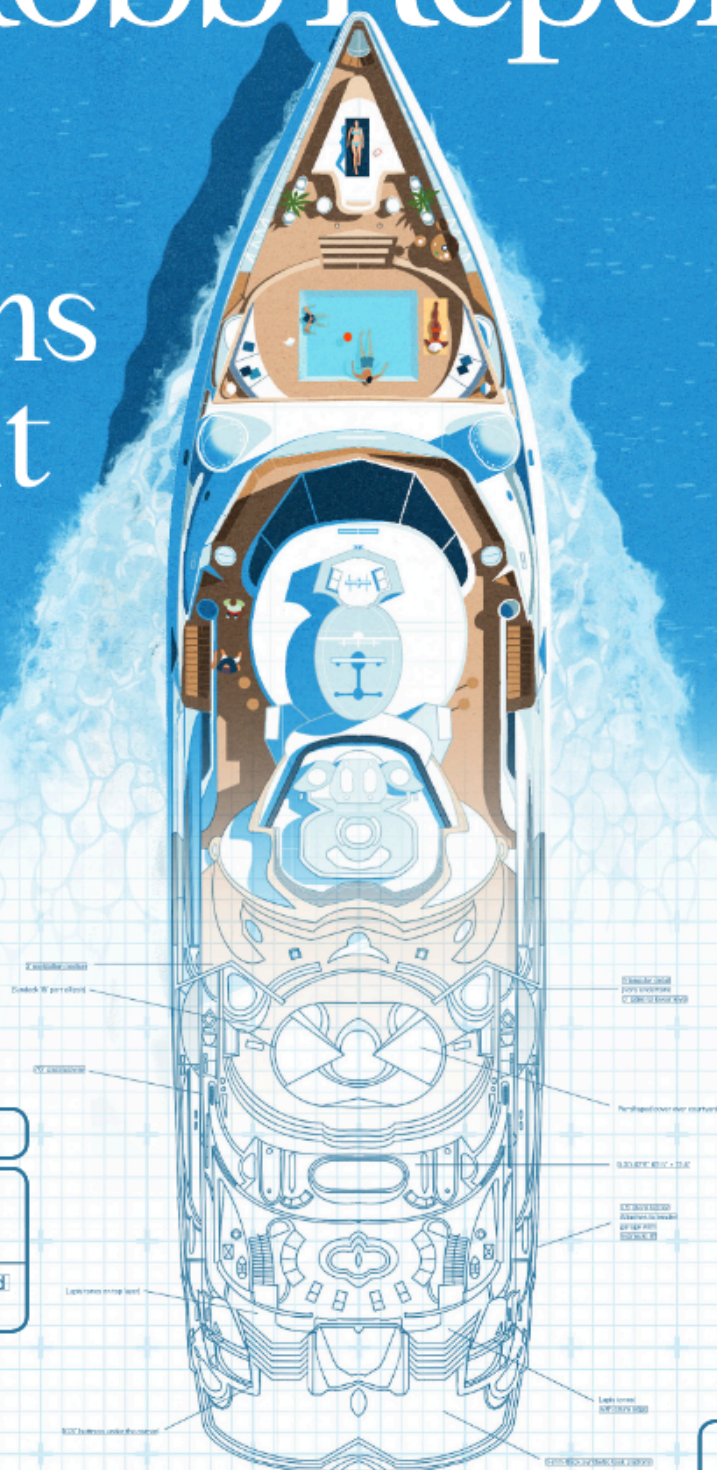


LUXURY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

Robb Report

Oceans Await




THE MARINE ISSUE

The Caribbean's
Secret Port
of Call

Yachting's
Other Piracy
Problem

Discover the Tuscan town behind
the superyacht phenomenon

Mackenzie Scott Throws
Down the Giving Gauntlet

An aerial photograph of a tropical coastline. The top of the image shows a sandy beach with some greenery and a small blue and yellow kayak. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, with several people swimming and a white motorboat. The bottom left shows a rocky shore with dense green vegetation. The text 'THE Caribbean's' is written in a large, white, serif font, and the subtitle 'Blissfully free of marinas and overdevelopment, the verdant Island of Dominica is everything' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font below it.

THE Caribbean's

Blissfully free of marinas and overdevelopment, the verdant Island of Dominica is everything

An aerial photograph of a secluded tropical beach. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, revealing the sandy bottom and several large, dark rocks. A small, sandy beach is visible at the top, with a few people and a small boat. The background shows a lush green forest and a rocky coastline.

Last Best Secret

you want a little-known locale to be. No wonder yacht owners are reluctant to spread the word.

BY MICHAEL VERDON

Dominica's secluded Secret Beach, which can be reached only by kayaking, paddleboarding, small boats or swimming.

Sixteen years ago, Hubert Winston was standing on a beach in Dominica's Prince Rupert Bay, watching a string of yachts sail by in the distance. "It looked like a flotilla," recalls Winston, who had just moved back to the island from Florida.

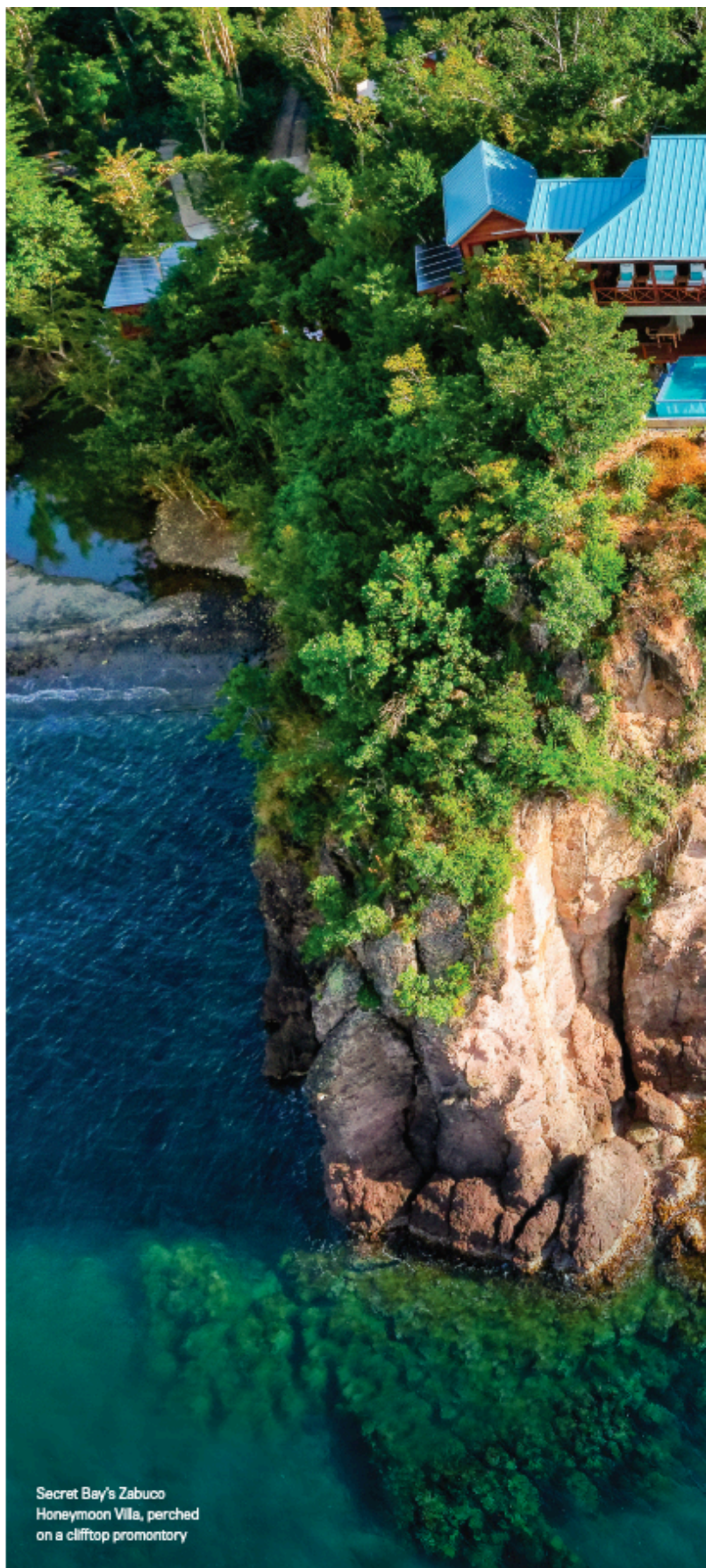
"They were traveling between Martinique and Guadeloupe, but not one of them ever stopped here. I didn't understand that. We had so much to offer."

With no marinas or international airport, the lush, mountainous island represented a big X on superyacht charts. Captains were reluctant to venture to Dominica in case they had engine problems or couldn't find a decent anchorage. They'd rather visit its French neighbors, with plenty of marinas, than gamble with the unknown, alluring as the green island looked from the distance.

Even now Dominica remains a tightly held secret among superyacht owners. It turns out that the crews—typically young, restless and adventurous—started going to the island for R&R, then informed their owners about what an unspoiled paradise it is. Nicknamed the "Nature Island," it offers a natural bounty of mountain terrain, rainforests, dormant volcanoes and coastal reefs that is unparalleled in the Caribbean. The locals provide the same authentic welcome—a bit cautious but unmistakable—I experienced on other islands 30 years ago, before it evaporated with modern development and stock-market booms. No condo commandos have invaded Dominica, thanks to its relative inaccessibility.

That aura of untouched remoteness has proven to be a siren song for superyachts, which typically gather in Prince Rupert Bay and smaller, more intimate anchorages, where the only other vessels are a few sailboats and the local fishing fleet, with its brightly colored wooden hulls.

Named by Christopher Columbus, who first sighted it on his second voyage to the hemisphere, in 1493, Dominica was colonized by the French and then traded back and forth between France and England across the 18th century. Gallic vestiges endure, though the few fortresses on the water were built by the British to repel French attacks. The country gained full independence from the UK in 1978. Prized for its bananas, grapefruit and oranges, it has otherwise remained a largely unspoiled Eden. "Rustic charm," cliché as it sounds, describes



Secret Bay's Zabuco Honeymoon Villa, perched on a clifftop promontory



the island perfectly. Waterfront cafés with names like Keepin' it Real and Cocoyea serve seafood caught from nearby bays and just-picked tropical-fruit juices. Scenes from *Pirates of the Caribbean* were filmed across the island because of its unsullied beauty.

Dominica "is for a certain kind of client who loves to experience nature up close and personal," says Gina Robertson, a charter broker with Fraser Yachts, ticking off adventure experiences that include canyoning, kayaking and hiking nature trails. In Dominica's favor: It's not the same old same old. "Nowadays, charterers don't want to do just the milk runs, and many are on extended charters, so will have more time to explore islands in depth."

Andrew "Cobra" O'Brien was one of the pioneers who introduced Dominica to the superyacht community. To compete with other islands, which have bustling marinas providing all manner of conveniences, he founded Cobra Tours & Yacht Services, offering fuel, provisions and mechanic services, as well as customs clearance and private tours of the island. Cobra Tours was instrumental in opening up Dominica by demonstrating that, even without a marina, seafarers would be well cared for. "We used to go to yacht shows in Monaco and Ft. Lauderdale to spread the word about what a great destination Dominica is," he says. His firm joined professional groups, including the International Superyacht Society, to help bolster the island's reputation among charter brokers. "Last season was the best for superyachts we'd ever had. We serviced 30 or 40 of them."

Often, he adds, they come after having their fill of shopping and upscale restaurants on Antigua or St. Barts. "Now 95 percent of the yachts don't just stumble on Dominica," O'Brien says. "It's a destination."

Several other firms that supply visiting vessels have emerged, including Winston's Dominica Yacht Services. Winston, who worked in Florida's marine industry, among other things, before returning to his homeland, saw an untapped market. "There was a disconnect back then, but we got the word out to the yachting world," he says. "We changed the whole notion of getting stuck in Dominica."

The island has since attracted the late Paul Allen's 414-foot *Octopus*, Nat Rothschild's *Planet Nine*, Andrey Melnichenko's 390-foot *Motor Yacht A* and the late Steve Jobs's *Venus*, among others. Bill Gates, Robert De Niro and Edward Norton have been spotted on superyacht tenders in Prince Rupert Bay. Five-star resorts, including Secret Bay and Cabrits Resort & Spa, with a pier on Douglas Bay, have welcomed yacht owners to their bars and restaurants.

Pre-Covid, of course. The rules have changed, with a negative PCR test required 24 to 72 hours before arrival; a visitor also takes a rapid test upon arrival, and it must be negative to enter. Then the visitor must quarantine at a government-designated spot and take yet another test on day five. If the results are negative, one is free to go anywhere. For owners or charter guests with time constraints, sitting on the yacht for six days is a non-starter, especially with that stunning but untouchable backdrop. But in Dominica, the notion of quarantine isn't quite so rigid as elsewhere. The authorities have set up the "Safe in Nature" program, in which visitors may stay at some of the island's most exclusive resorts and see the approved sights (the best on the island) with a private, Covid-certified guide. Not every resort allows guests off-property, but the two where I stayed—Secret Bay Resort at the north end and Jungle Bay Resort & Spa at the south—do. I was not only able to move relatively freely around the island but also to transfer between the two resorts over the six days.

Covid or not, Dominica remains largely undiscovered compared to the heavily boated islands. With 260 square miles of hills and mountains, and the majority of its population of 74,000 living on the coast, most of the interior is rural or undeveloped. "Everybody has cruised the



[British Virgin Islands]," says Winston. "We have something different, something special. Guests just fall in love with our serenity."

For yachts, the action is concentrated at the northern and southern ends. Bays on the north side of the island offer sublime, light-blue water, wide-open anchorages and easy access to the town of Portsmouth by tender. The bays often live up to their names. With its two beaches and reef colored by tropical fish, Secret Bay really is. Even though it's just around the corner from the much busier Prince Rupert Bay, captains tend to avoid it because of exposure to shifting winds, and instead drop anchor on its edge and send in tenders.

North of Prince Rupert Bay, the road follows a string of more bays—Douglas, Toucari, Marceau and Connor—that make postcard-perfect anchorages, with inland destinations like Cold Sulphur Springs (a dormant volcano crater that emits caramel-colored, sulphur-infused water) and Chaudiere Pool, a 30-foot-deep pool beneath a waterfall, being among the north's natural wonders. Four-wheeling up narrow mountain roads to Chaudiere, we pass tiny farms with pineapples and coconuts. Around every corner there's another exceptional ocean view.


For a relatively small island, Dominica has diverse terrain. The Indian River is like an Amazon tributary, with slow-moving brackish water and thick vegetation on the banks. I spend a few hours with "Fire," a fiftysomething Rastafarian, rowing a handmade red, yellow and green wooden boat upstream. Fire recites the English, Creole and French names for virtually every tree and flower we pass. At the top,



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The open-air Gommier Spa on Secret Bay overlooks Cabrits National Park; Dominica is awash in prime diving spots; Zabuco Villa's private plunge pool and outdoor shower.







Batibou Beach, shaded by a canopy of coconut trees, is popular for swimming and snorkeling.

“Now 95 percent of the yachts don’t just stumble on Dominica. It’s a destination.”

The Caribbean's Last Best Secret





Prince Rupert Bay, on the island's northwest coast, is a popular anchorage.

we stop at a plantation, a sign at the empty café reading: *TIME STANDS STILL AT THE BUSH BAR*. That's the feeling I have all week.

The number of outsiders visiting Dominica is a sliver of what it would be during a normal season, so I seem to have the river—and almost everything else—to myself. At Secret Bay resort, with its focus on privacy—there are just 10 villas, all overlooking the ocean—I have a private-chef experience with Fábio Fernandes. The resort's executive chef is a Lisbon native who trained at a Michelin-star restaurant in Portugal and worked at award winners in Austria, Africa and the UK. He plans daily menus around me, as I dine alone on the open terrace of the Zing Zing Restaurant. Fernandes uses locally sourced tuna and kingfish, not to mention farm-to-table vegetables, and elevates them many levels, with creative presentations and fusions of unlikely ingredients. His signature Zero Miles Tuna, with sustainable ingredients, blends sushi-grade fish, *shado beni* emulsion, mango and ginger gels, and pumpkin puree.

The southern part of the island is all about the water, even inland. Trafalgar Falls, Titou Gorge and Boiling Lake practically beg to be photographed and shared, while the southwestern corner is one of the world's highest-ranked dive and snorkeling sites. The area south of Champagne Beach down to the protected arm of land at Scott's Head is part of the Soufrière-Scott's Head Marine Reserve, so yachts must anchor north in L'Anse Bateau. Visitors also have to hire local guides for diving and snorkeling. The reserve is mostly a haven for reef fish, but pods of dolphins and even sperm whales are occasional visitors.

"With good conditions, visibility is 80 feet below the surface," says Weefers Jules, my guide from Jungle Bay resort, who has been a Dominica dive master for 20 years. With a front having just passed through, the usually clear waters of Champagne Reef—so named because the volcanic gases venting through fissures form bubbles—are muddied, so we kayak to L'abym, or the Abyss, below Witch's Point, where the shoreline reef transitions into a vertical wall that drops 1,000 feet. The water is cool, and wind gusts are pushing us offshore a bit, but the fins propel me through the reef. Schools of sergeant majors, doctor fish, angelfish and spotted moray eels swim around us, while a few stingrays flee into the deep. A hundred yards away, a group is free-diving.

With thousands of dives under his belt, Jules says he never tires of the marine life in Soufrière Bay, the island's dividing line between the calm Caribbean Sea and the much fiercer Atlantic. Within a relatively small space, the Soufrière reserve—an UNESCO World Heritage Site—offers a half-dozen world-class dives, such as Scott's Head Pinnacle, beginning with a rock formation called Swiss Cheese, and leading to a volcanic crater that drops as far as 2,000 feet at the center. "There are hundreds of soldier fish at the entrance," he says. "When you turn sideways, there are lobsters and eels in the walls' cracks." At the northern edge of the Soufrière crater, five underwater peaks called Dangleben's Pinnacles host plenty of reef fish and also offer glimpses of turtles and horse-eye jacks.

The Atlantic side of Dominica has yet more dive sites, including the spectacular Mountain Top, and the northern end of the island has nearly a dozen others, including one, called Elephant's Ass, so secluded that most locals don't even know about it. There are also opportunities to swim with sperm whales. Because of Covid-related cancellations, the nearly three-year wait for the experience can be closer to a few weeks.

After snorkeling, I return to Jungle Bay, my home on the southern end of the island. It's an eco-resort with private villas built of local wood and stone, two yoga studios, a restaurant overlooking the water and a Zen-like spa. Nature trails, banana plants and stone walls, plus a large Buddha, define the resort. Like Secret Bay, it's an ocean sanctuary.

That feeling of sanctuary, with a heightened sense of exclusivity, is ultimately what attracts superyacht owners to Dominica. And why they're not telling their friends. **■**