

SAILING THE RHINE ✨ DIVING WITH COUSTEAU ✨ MANITOBA, UNMAPPED

# CANADIAN *Traveller*

## HUMAN *connections,* Far & Wide

INSIDE

A 'how to' guide for  
**TIPPING ABROAD**

Canadian icon &  
lifelong traveller

**JANN ARDEN**

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LUXURY

*Reverie beneath the sea:*  
**Diving with  
Cousteau's  
crew off Petit  
St. Vincent**

When it comes to choosing between a once-in-a-lifetime dive experience or luxe and relaxation at a private island resort, why sacrifice one for the other? Our writer learns of a place where, when you opt for the former, the latter will be waiting on the other side.

BY JILL GLEESON







I'M NOT QUITE PANICKING. NOT YET. THE DIVE boat, which is barely 10 minutes out from Petit St. Vincent – a tiny, private island in the Grenadines – is just now slowing. It's early November, the little spit of land's luxe but laidback 22-cottage resort opened mere days before for the season. So, there is only a handful of us onboard: the congenial Phil Stephenson, chairman of the company that owns PSV and an ardent ocean conservationist; one of the resort's guests; a travel photographer; a few dive masters; a couple of crew; and me. Stephenson and the guest seem to be buddies. They're joking about trying to reach 18 metres on this dive. Clearly, this is an area of relatively shallow waters, which is absolutely fine by me.

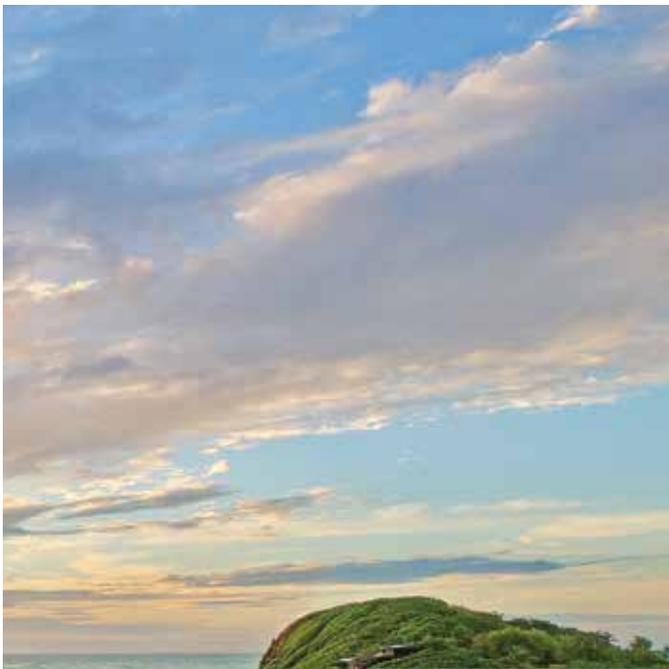
I hate scuba diving. It terrifies me in a primal way, the fear bubbling up from deep within my brain – the part that doesn't respond to calm and logical entreaties like, "But with this equipment we really can breathe underwater!"

Still, when you have a chance to explore the briny deep with a team handpicked by Jean-Michel Cousteau, eldest son of the fabled ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau, you don't pass it up. Since late 2014, Petit St. Vincent has been host to the Jean-Michel Cousteau Caribbean Diving Center, one of only two such ventures in the world (the other is in far-flung Fiji). The centre's menu includes scuba certification classes and dive trips like this one, through which Cousteau is continuing his father's work.

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Petit  
St. Vincent  
coast line

Jean-Michel  
Cousteau Caribbean  
Diving Center





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Exploring  
and enjoying  
the coral reef

Mike Toy, Jean-Michel Cousteau Diving

“We must connect the ocean to the existence of every human being,” Jean-Michel declared when he cracked the champagne on the centre. “My father used to say, ‘People protect what they love.’ It is our hope that by encouraging and enabling divers to explore the waters around PSV, we will be raising awareness of the importance of protecting our water planet.”

I fervently believe in the importance of protecting our water planet – I’m just not entirely sure I’m ready to get up close and personal with it. I’m wondering, with mounting anxiety, why I didn’t just stay at the resort – once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get wet with Cousteau’s crew or not. I could have snoozed in bed, ordering a late breakfast to my smart, mid-century-style blue bitch stone cottage, no WiFi, cell reception or televisions to disturb there, or in any of the island’s accommodations. Communication with butler service, I was told upon check in, is via a flag system dating back a half-century to the resort’s founding – raise a yellow flag up the pole at the end of the cottage walkway to make a request; hoist a red for privacy.

Right this minute, I could be lazing on the island’s three kilometres of untrammled white sand beaches or

indulging in a Balinese-style massage in the resort’s open-air spa. I could be checking out the kitchen garden, where verdant masses of organic produce is tended, or hiking 84 metres to the top of Marni Hill for a show-stopping view of the Caribbean’s blue-green waters. Hell, I could be learning to play tennis on one of the resort’s courts.

But instead, I’m on this now-nearly-deserted boat. Everyone else is diving. It’s just the crew, me and Gilan, the dive-master who will be my escort on this underwater adventure. I’ve warned him about my scuba phobia and he’s been great, getting me outfitted in my gear, all the while talking quietly, soothing me with his voice, the way you would a spooked horse. Then he leaps into that clear, cool blue water and before I can question further what I’m doing, I’m bobbing next to him on the Caribbean’s gentle waves.

Gilan is patient, unlike the other divemasters in my experience. He allows me to pop my face in and out of the sea repeatedly while breathing through my regulator, as a way to assure my screaming brain that I won’t suffocate when we descend. Maybe it’s his easygoing demeanor. Maybe it’s that I know I’m with a true dive pro; would a Cousteau have any other in his employ? So I follow Gilan as he slips under the surface, locking eyes with him as we slowly sink, finding to my amazement that I’m unafraid – almost relaxed. ➤



Jean-Michel Cousteau, eldest son of ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau

At about 12 metres down, we reach coral – a vast, ranging mountain of it. There are brilliantly hued tropical fish darting everywhere, the kind usually encountered in dentist office aquariums as a way to pacify nervous patients. They have the same effect here. Bewitched, I follow them, Gilan alongside me, pointing out skittering lobsters and long-limbed crabs – anywhere else monsters, but in the sea, simply part of the show. And then I see Gilan’s eyes go big behind his mask. I follow his gaze to a spotted eagle ray, its wingspan at least two metres across, gliding beside us with such grace that it appears to be moving in slow motion.

It stops, hovering just above the reef, and I join it, keeping some space between me and its flank, careful not to disturb. Its smooth black hide is patterned with white spots, its mouth curved in what looks from my position like a happy grin. I stay no more than a minute and then leave it be, so grateful for the moment we shared that my eyes well with tears behind my mask. Much later – after I’ve taken the ferry from PSV to Union Island, and the tiny plane that buzzes more like an irritated bee than a flying machine from Union Island to Barbados, and the roaring jet from Barbados back home – I will discover that spotted eagle rays are notoriously shy. It’s rare one allows a diver so close.

The Cousteaus, both papa and son, were right, of course. I emerge from my hour under the ocean’s surface dazzled and in love, as if I’d spent my time with a matinee idol rather than sea urchins and crustaceans. Back on the boat, I’m heartened to learn about the work Gilan and the Cousteau crew are doing to restore reefs on the Atlantic side of PSV, creating a kind of nursery three metres under with bits of Elkhorn coral kipped from spots around the island. This project, supported in part by the Philip Stephenson Foundation, a non-profit organization “dedicated to ocean exploration, protection and education,” isn’t the only conservation effort happening here.

Together with CLEAR Caribbean, The Nature Conservancy, and Sustainable Grenadines, the foundation is restoring a local lagoon and mangrove habitat and working with local anglers to establish a no-fishing area. These kind of endeavours are desperately needed. According to ocean conservationist and explorer Dr. Sylvia Earle, who attended a recent symposium centered on marine preservation and restoration held on PSV, “Globally, about half of the coral reefs, mangroves and

seagrass meadows are gone or are in a state of sharp decline. In the Caribbean, about 80 per cent are gone. Ninety per cent of the sharks, tunas and many other kinds of commercially fished wildlife have been taken. But there is evidence that with care, recovery can occur.”

Although I don’t have quite the underwater skills necessary, I find myself wishing that I could lend a hand in the coral garden during the remainder of my stay. Instead, I gaze out at the sea – sometimes from my own little private beach, steps from my cottage; sometimes from the resort’s fine, open-air restaurant, which sits gracefully atop a hill.

I’ve always been an advocate for “our water planet,” signing petitions against the slaughter of dolphins and giving money to Greenpeace, but I can’t deny my diving experience raised the stakes for me, much as the Cousteaus knew it would. When I discover that with a little planning ahead I can help with Petit St. Vincent marine restoration projects, I begin plotting my return. I’m hooked – on diving, on saving the oceans, on this magical little island. 



## When You Go

**WHAT TO DO:** Save a day for a sail aboard **Beauty**, a 15-metre hand-built sloop captained by the charming Englishman Jeff Stevens. Snorkel with sea turtles in the idyllic Tobago Cays Marine Park, then hop back on the boat as captain turns chef and grills lobster and steak for lunch. It’s just as spectacular as it sounds.

**WHAT TO EAT:** Be sure to indulge in Petit St. Vincent’s main restaurant’s transformative seafood curry, which includes chunks of freshly-caught local lobster bathed in a coconut-milk broth. Once a week, the beach restaurant hosts a festive barbecue with grilled lobster and Black Angus steak, served to the accompaniment of a West Indian steel pan band.

**WHAT YOU’LL PAY:** Don’t let the low-key vibe of Petit St. Vincent fool you. Guests don’t drip in diamonds here – this is the kind of posh that doesn’t have to act posh. Double occupancy nightly rates, which include meals and use of non-motorized water sports equipment, begin at the low season rate of \$1,200 for a one-bedroom cottage and \$1,700 for a two-bedroom beach villa.

**HOW TO GET THERE:** Yes, you really do need to fly to Barbados, hop on a puddle jumper and board a boat to get to Petit St. Vincent. It’s not called a hideaway for no reason. The good news is Air Canada and WestJet offer non-stop flights from Toronto to Bridgeport, making that leg of the trip a fast five hours.