

# COASTAL LIVING®

MAKE A SPLASH WITH  
**COLOR**

**45** EASY WAYS TO  
**BRIGHTEN UP**  
YOUR HOME



MIMOSA BAR  
WITH A TWIST!  
PAGE 86

(OUR FIRST-EVER!)  
**EVERYTHING  
GUIDE TO PAINT**

FOOLPROOF HUES, DESIGNER SECRETS,  
AND SUPER FAST MAKEOVERS

888  
059  
P204  
166L  
#BXNGLVG \*\*\*\*\*EORLOT 0320A\*\*R-008  
#2934 3195 15N#CT 0544R1 00 C JUN16 166N  
T JBA 2 AK E 1  
T N T N T N T N T N  
DELRAY BEACH FL 33446-3333

# NAVIGATOR

Where To Go Now On The Coast

EXPLORE

## THE MAKING OF A DIVER

Two days beneath the water off the shores of Petit St. Vincent deliver a new, brightly colored world



Petit St. Vincent's gateway to splendors beneath the surface

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL SIGHT, and an odd one: the thin antennae of a cautious lobster approaching my bare fingertips, extended from the sleeve of my wetsuit. Forty feet below the surface of the Atlantic and with an hour's worth of oxygen strapped to my back, I can afford to wait for him to receive my gentle overture. And he does. His antennae carefully explore their way up to my palm with a touch so light I wonder if I'm imagining it.

I'm here, hovering just above the ocean floor amid neon coral reefs, to see for myself what I'd only before seen on television or in pictures. These waters are off the tiny Caribbean island resort of Petit St. Vincent, where the waterfront villas are open-air, food is sourced straight from the chef's garden and the sea, and marine life is the star. It's this exquisite underwater ecosystem, in fact, that inspired Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of celebrated ocean pioneer Jacques Cousteau and storied explorer in his own right, to select the lush island for his latest dive center.

As the lobster retreats, I allow my gaze to travel upward, to the water's surface. I've seen the sun over water countless times, but never from below, the rays streaming down on me as if they're spotlights and I'm at center stage. Suddenly, to my right, two bright yellow butterfly fish zoom past, clearly on their way to somewhere important. For these few moments I am a part of their world, immersed in an otherwise unseen spectacle.

It is a spectacle to which entrance does not come easily, and I have come here to earn admission in a serious way. This is my second of two deep-water excursions, and the final step to gain certification from the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), which offers this program at dive centers and resorts across the world. The course is intense: two days of classroom work, a written exam, shallow-water training, and two deeper dives.

The first day keeps us close to shore and focused on safety. My diving coach, Irene, and I head 30 feet offshore, drop to our knees on the sandy bottom, and drill for an hour in about 10 feet of water. I practice



The open-air living rooms in each villa offer easy respite (and direct beach access) after a day spent exploring underwater.

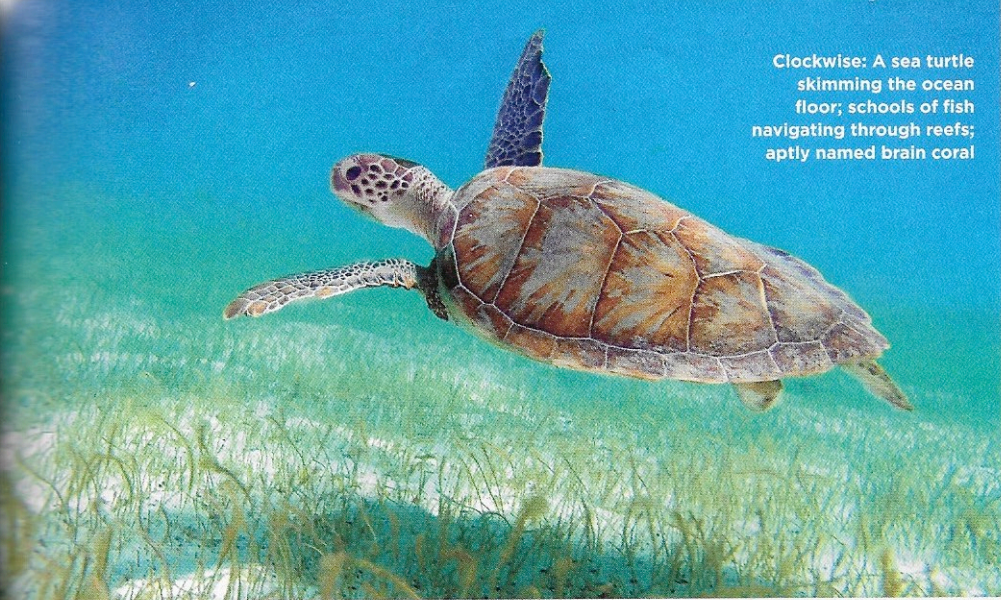
signaling for help, clearing water from my goggles, and sharing oxygen in case one of us runs out. Back above the surface, the course gets even more serious: I walk back to my villa with a 250-page book on dive theory and less than a day to study for a test on it all. Luckily, the dive center's peaceful setting on Petit St. Vincent assuages the course's rigor. I study while lying in my hammock and snacking on fresh fruit, with the sun and the breeze engaged in a constant dance of warming my skin and cooling me off.

My studies pay off. The next morning, I pass the 50-question written exam and return to the sea with Irene, who is now not just my instructor, but also my partner in exploration for the two deep dives we'll

complete today. On our first, my heavy breathing depletes my tank after a quick 30 minutes, and I get schooled on how to sip, not gulp, my air. On dive two, I follow just behind Irene's flippers, taking slow sips on my oxygen like a practiced cocktail taster. Because Irene and I can't speak underwater, we find a new way of communicating that's splendidly childlike. She points to her eyes and then to a red striped lionfish staring us down: *Watch this.* We shake hands after a spiky baby porcupine-fish puffs up in front of us: *That was so cool!*

Irene hovers near a Christmas tree worm with its bright red feathery plumes as a ridge I let it out of its camouflage. Gently undulating in the current, it's poking out a few inches from a hole

Clockwise: A sea turtle  
skimming the ocean  
floor; schools of fish  
navigating through reefs;  
aptly named brain coral



## THE DETAILS

### GET HERE

Visitors fly to Grantley Adams International Airport in Barbados. From there, **Mustique Airways** runs a round-trip Barbados-Union Island flight; the last leg is a boat ride captained by resort staff between Union Island and Petit St. Vincent (\$35 per person).

### STAY HERE

Double-occupancy rates in high season (January-April) are \$1,400 per night for a one-bedroom villa. Rates include three meals per day, butler room service, and use of all nonmotorized watersports and facilities on the island; 954/963-7401 or [petitstvincent.com](http://petitstvincent.com).

### DIVE HERE

**Jean-Michel Cousteau's new dive center** offers a half-day diving experience for \$170, PADI SCUBA certification for \$450 over two days, and full SCUBA certification for \$650 over three days. Certified divers can purchase nitrox for excursions for \$85 per tank.

in the coral like a mini holiday tree in a tropical (and underwater) town square. But here's the real show: Irene snaps her fingers, and it instantly disappears into its tiny cave. No Tannenbaum! She looks at me with what I think is a smile behind her regulator, and I clap my hands in glee. Schools of miniscule silver and orange fish dart around, accommodating us into their traffic patterns.

This time, I see the next, cool creature first: a sea turtle. I motion for Irene's attention, and we both watch, mesmerized. She points to her oxygen monitor and then at mine: *Check your supply*. It's time to go back up, but I want nothing more than to keep exploring. As if my wish were overheard, the biggest creature we've seen

yet soars overhead. I see the fin first and think it's a small shark, but as it dips below us I can see that it's a spotted eagle ray, its white-dotted dark gray body flapping gracefully yet forcefully through the water.

Irene and I surface, two heads bobbing in the surf and shouting back and forth to each other over the noise of the boat's motor. "You're so lucky," she hollers. "We saw everything today."

Late that afternoon, I find a stool at the resort bar, high above a turquoise sea decorated with catamarans and yachts. It's a bird's view, but my mind is still underwater, colored with the incomparable hues of my new, fluid world. Round tables are refilled before they're even empty. The rum brings out a sense of camaraderie

among this already relaxed crew, who all seem to have spots of pink peeking out from their sundresses and golf shirts. A couple from New Jersey tells me that they've been planning this trip since 1984, and it's better than they ever imagined. A woman from California explains that she makes it here once a year, though she rarely travels anywhere else.

I smile as I listen to their accounts of days spent sipping cocktails with their feet in the sand or getting Balinese massages at the hillside spa. I sip my own cocktail—a piña colada—which tastes sublime in a way that a piña colada usually doesn't. And then I realize why: A little bit of sweet flavors of the tropics lingers a bewitching trace of salt on my lips. ■