

The journey of a million miles — or, more precisely, 2,619 feet up the volcanic peak Gros Piton (below) — begins under the expert tutelage of a veteran Pitons guide such as Damascus Possele (right).



Pilgrim's Progress

A hesitant hiker's journey to the top of St. Lucia's Gros Piton

6:00 a.m. Dawn breaks, and I stir from a fitful sleep to insistent bird song and the sight of mist-crowned Gros Piton towering overhead. For the past few days the volcanic peak and its little sister, Petit Piton, have been my silent chaperones as I've toiled around the historic town of Soufrière. And they've formed a surreal backdrop to my stay at Ladera resort, where a hillside cluster of three-walled suites frames their statuesque majesty. And today, in a matter of minutes, I'll be experiencing that magnificence close up, on a 2,619-foot hike to Gros Piton's summit. And since the nearest I've ever gotten to an

endurance event is nine hours of power shopping, I'm filled with equal parts wild excitement and naked fear.

"A couple thousand times," my guide, Damascus Possele, says casually when I ask him how many times he's made the ascent. Possele lives in 300-year-old Fond Gens Libre, the historic village at the foot of the Pitons. Since 2004, when the spires were declared part of a UNESCO World Heritage site, 11 villagers have been certified to shepherd hikers up and down the mountains' steep slopes.

As our van negotiates the winding narrow roads to the beginning of the trail, Possele tells me that ascending the Pitons is a rite of passage for young villagers. And he tells me about his quickest hike, with a European couple who made it up in an hour and down in 45 minutes — complete with a 2-year-old strapped to the woman's back. "But it usually takes between three and five hours round-trip," Possele says, adding with an ill-concealed glance at my rounded frame, "and even longer for people whose occupation is sitting."

8:13 a.m. At the base-camp interpretive center, Possele traces our southside route on a tabletop model of the mountain, pointing out the rest stops that conveniently divide the climb into quarters. As we set off, the air is damp with morning dew and breezes whisper through the trees. Following the tree-trimmed dirt track, we chitchat politely, and for a moment I allow myself the hope that the hike won't be that hard. But as the dusty, gently sloping path gives way to a staircase of large, basalt volcanic stones that appear to have tumbled down the mountainside and solidified haphazardly where they fell, I realize my folly.

Eyes down, focused on planting my feet precisely on the textured rocks, I navigate the now steeply rising footpath. I'm grateful for the gnarled red-cedar walking stick Possele proffered at the start of the trail, which I use to buttress my efforts. Fifteen minutes in, conversation has ground to a halt; it's all I can do to breathe. By the time we reach the end of the first quarter, I'm well winded. But the camera-ready view, overlooking the calm sapphire seas at Anse L'Avergne and stretching to the island of St. Vincent, 21 miles away, is worth the climb.

8:54 a.m. This is like the stair climber at the gym — only worse. There's no off switch, no air conditioning and no iPod to distract me from the seemingly infinite staircase. As I huff and puff my way over the winding, rocky cascade, my heart pounds a staccato rhythm in my chest and I can feel the blood pulsing in my ears. By now I've fallen behind the group, and all around me birds are merrily chirping from the treetops, unaware of my plight — or perhaps mocking it. But when Possele shouts down that we're only five minutes from the halfway mark, I suck it up and press on. I can do anything for five minutes, right?

Finally at the mountain's midpoint, I see proud Petit Piton piercing the sea's glasslike surface. I'm swollen with joyful accomplishment and mild hysteria as I realize that I, the Person Least Likely to Abandon Air-Conditioned Comfort, have almost conquered this beast. Bring it on!

9:45 a.m. Gros Piton brings it, all right. It being incredibly strenuous climbing



over "steps" dug out of the mountainside. Delineated by half-buried branches laid horizontally, each is between 18 and 24 inches high, and negotiating them is no easy feat for a less-than-5-foot-tall hiking wannabe. But I doggedly plod on, too

tired to whine, too far up to turn back, too proud to admit defeat. "Almost there!" calls the good-natured Possele, who sometimes makes the round-trip trek twice a day. He's not even breathing heavily or breaking a sweat as he strides along with sure-footed ease. I resolve to kill him — if I can muster the energy.

10:32 a.m. And then, just when I think things can't get any tougher, they somehow do. I'm now literally crouched on all fours, clambering over volcanic boulders slick with lime-green lichen. At this elevation the temperature has mercifully dropped a few degrees, and I notice that the vegetation has changed also, to a ferny, elfin woodland rainforest. But I'm so focused on the gargantuan effort it takes to haul my aching body onward and upward that I'm only vaguely aware of the leaves' lace-like shadows on the tangled undergrowth. If I'm to join my companions at the summit any time this century, botanical appreciation is a luxury I can't afford.

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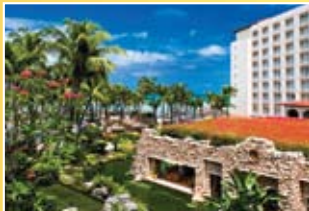
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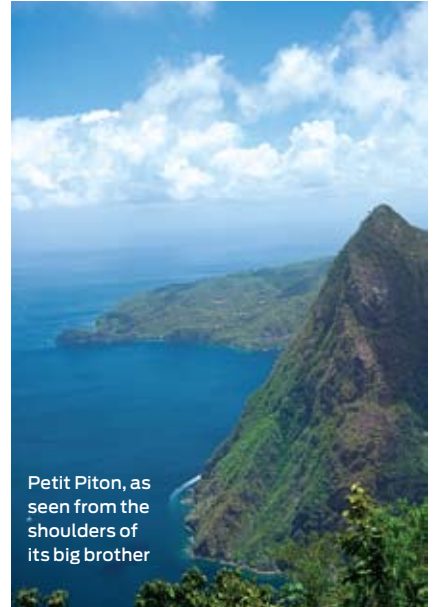
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Petit Piton, as seen from the shoulders of its big brother

11:15 a.m. With an unladylike grunt, I pull myself upright and raise my head to a vista so awe-inspiring, so expansive, so gosh-darn beautiful that I almost forget the utter torture it took to get here. Hundreds of feet below, St. Lucia's emerald landscape unfurls, dappled with the shadows of cottony clouds drifting silently overhead. In the distance there's Mount Gimie (the island's tallest peak), the fishing village of Choiseul, and the tiny Maria Islands. Multicolored rooftops embellish the undulating carpet, and sky and sea meld seamlessly into a dazzling turquoise. I feel completely alive, almost vibrating with exhilaration.

Back at Ladera later that afternoon, propped on the edge of my mountain-view plunge pool, I gaze up at Gros Piton, to which I now feel a powerful and permanent connection. I'm filled with respect for the primordial peak — and, equally, for the modern miracle of air conditioning.

— SARAH GREAVES-GABBADON

✦ *Climbers may ascend the Pitons between 7 a.m. and 2 p.m., accompanied by a registered guide. Hiking boots or trail sneakers are highly recommended; bring plenty of water. Island Routes offers bespoke hikes, including lunch and round-trip hotel transportation, for \$140 per person from northern resorts and \$90 from hotels in the south. 877-768-8370; islandroutes.com*