

## **Lift Your Spirit and Tone Your Body - Nature Isle Hiking by Martha Cuffy**

Over the years my passionate urge to smell, touch and tread upon the soil and bush of both dramatic and serene trails in Dominica have given me insights into the mental and physical delights of hiking.

### **A Natural Spa and Gym**

Who needs a gym when you can find challenging trails that give a Stairmaster a good run for its money? And you can choose trails that allow your muscles to be pummelled by the toning torrents of a natural river Jacuzzi as well. The pounds naturally drop away, without your mind being bombarded by guilt-ridden dieting strategies. It just happens. I repeat, it just happens naturally.

There are various trails around the island to suit people of different ages and fitness levels from the panoramic walk at Scotts Head to the towering heights of Morne Diablotin.

In either case, over time, you build stamina, coordination and balance and evolve into a toned, gleaming hiking machine.

### **Building Bone Density**

For women, regular hiking can help prevent osteoporosis. Working against the force of gravity helps increase bone density and slows calcium loss, thus strengthening bones and making them less susceptible to breaking. And believe it or not, trails are gentler on the joints than concrete pavements.

### **Feel your anxiety dissolve**

When you have to scramble along a rugged coastline, jumping at the last minute onto a jagged rock ledge to avoid the rising tide, you naturally develop a physical intimacy with the shrubs and crags of the coastline. What this gives you on a mental and spiritual level is the ability to be really present in the moment and a sense of profound peace. You have no time to fill your head with fears when you risk falling into the turbulent waves of the Atlantic Ocean. This state of being is akin to an active but calm meditation which offers great benefits to establishing and maintaining a peaceful state of mind.

### **Ecotherapy**

Recognition of the benefits of ecotherapy is on the rise. Ecotherapy is the use of conservation projects or a natural environment to help recovery from illness, particularly for those with mental health problems. The first study into "ecotherapy" found that fresh air and exercise cut depression in more than 70 per cent of people

In short, walking in nature is a cheap drug-free way to get real, and relaxed. And with that presence a peace and joy that depends on nothing external to you arises.

### **A Solar Spirit Booster**

After months of dreary rainfall or cold weather, nothing lifts the spirits more than choosing a hike that allows you to feel the warm sand between your toes (who needs boots!) and the sunlight passing like a caressing laser down your spine. Smiling and feeling good about yourself and life naturally follow. Even if it does rain watch the rainbows and enjoy the warm tropical rain, embrace the elements and remember there's always a hot tub you can visit afterwards to warm your bones

### **Feel part of a lively community**

And remember you are not the only one having this experience. You can be accompanied by fellow adventure-seekers by joining a group tour or one of Dominica's hiking groups. I have met hikers who come from all walks of life and countries, and our differences dissolve, as we climb and help each other experience the wonders of Dominica's mountains, coastlines and rivers. I have seen people who carry heavy responsibility laugh with the pure delight of a small child once we hit the water with our weary sweaty bodies.

And even if you choose to hike alone, there are a host of colorful creatures, aquatic and land-based, who are happy to make a quick appearance to check that you are ok, before scurrying along their merry way in the undergrowth or bush. Dominica has the **most diverse assemblage of wildlife in the Caribbean** with over 170 species of birds, 55 types of butterflies, 20 species of crabs, 13 species of reptiles, 3 species of turtles, and 10 varieties of colourful lizards, so even if you walk alone, you certainly won't feel lonely for long. Sometimes it feels like an experience out of Jungle Book, and with the added benefit of there being no dangerous species on this island.

### **Nature Teaches you Compassion/Humility**

I can not only sweat off my weight, but my vexation with somebody as well. I remember hiking up to the windy heights of Palmiste, on a fairly challenging piece of trail, and coming to the realization that I needed to apologise to someone. I duly sent a brief text message saying sorry and was heartened by the response. I didn't need to talk out the situation, I just needed to let it pass through my body as my muscles tightened and stretched up a muddy trail. Thus hiking provides an opportunity for inner reflection and personal development without having to pay for any psychological therapy.

### **Expand Your Mind**

Walking along the steep ridges near Petite Soufrière, looking out to the windswept coastal forest of Rosalie, I feel an inner expansion of my spirit that can be hard to put into words. You feel more alive, and willing to dream about your life and possibilities in a way that is hard to do when stuck in an air-conditioned office with a limited view of yet another air-conditioned building...

### **More Breath More Energy**

And when you move out of an air-conditioned environment you will appreciate the clean energizing air of the high mountains. You will also build up your lung capacity if you continue to pick different trails of varying difficulty. So you will find yourself being able to do more with less effort.

### **Belief in Yourself**

Tackling a tricky climb or hike can boost your self-esteem like nothing else. When you look back and see what you either climbed or descended, you can justifiably ask yourself "Was I crazy?" The answer is often yes. And Mother Nature has a way of creating natural challenge for young and seasoned hikers alike. The 6 hour or so hike to the Boiling Lake, a World Heritage Site, rates highly as a rite of passage for any hiker visiting this Nature Isle.

The post-hike ache can often make you wonder whether it was worth it. But then there are over 360 rivers and numerous secluded beaches where you can soothe

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your weary bones, cook a broth on a coal pot, and embellish the tales of how you made it.

