

DESTINATION REPORT

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Donna Salerno, CTC, MCC, DS
888-777-7820
Email:
Info@DonnaSalernoTravel.com

P.O. Box 11751
Naples, Florida 34101

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YOUR TRAVEL SNAPSHOT: Destinations included in this guide

St Vincent, St Vincent & Grenadines

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INTRODUCTION

The name of the nation, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, is a good clue that the largest island of St. Vincent is the political and economic center of the nation. Home to slaveholding plantations in the early colonial era, today St. Vincent's agricultural operations produce bananas, pineapple and arrowroot plants, among other crops.

Kingstown is the capital and largest city, but it still seems like a small town. Tucked between a hillside and the ocean, its narrow streets are a mix of old-world cobblestone and modern pavement. Buildings are mostly one- and two-stories tall and fashioned from fieldstone or clapboard splashed with fading pastel colors. Most roofs are made of tin.

Clustered downtown are shops, grocery stores, mediocre restaurants and historic churches. A spacious open-air market anchors Market Square (five blocks west of the tourist office), which is at its busiest on Friday and Saturday. Fresh fish and produce fill tables set up by vendors, who shout out prices as you pass by. The sidewalks near the waterfront are packed with vendors selling everything from penny candy to breadfruit. A fascinating fishermen's market is along the waterfront, just north of Market Square. Fresh fish is always plentiful.

Places of worship dominate the landscape in Kingstown. Three blocks west of the market along Grenville Street is the stately St. George's Anglican Cathedral, which was completed in 1820. Its Georgian-style architecture is punctuated by a stained-glass window, entitled *The Red Angel*, that was originally commissioned by Queen Victoria for St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The queen, unhappy that the angel was not wearing white, placed the window in storage, where it was later discovered and then taken to St. Vincent.

Across the street from the Anglican Church, the Romanesque arches and Gothic spires of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral, built in 1823, stand in stark contrast to its plain Anglican cousin. The church was designed and richly furnished by the locally famous Belgian Benedictine priest Dom Charles Verbeke, whose bust stares down from a parapet over the east courtyard. Between these two cathedrals, on Grenville Street, is the Methodist Church. Its cemetery contains tombstones dating back to the early 1800s.

North of the churches off Leeward Road are the Botanical Gardens, which were established in 1765, making them among the oldest gardens in the Western Hemisphere. Their flora includes what is believed to be an offshoot of a breadfruit tree that Captain Bligh brought from Tahiti in 1793. The gardens also shelter an aviary with rare St. Vincent parrots, part of a captive-breeding program aimed at saving this endangered species.

On the western tip of the Kingstown Harbor promontory is the imposing form of Fort Charlotte. Completed in 1806 to defend against Napoleon's troops, the fort contains a number of old batteries and 19th-century cannons. The views from the fort, which is some 600 ft/200 m above the harbor, are spectacular—you can see Kingstown and many of the Grenadines. If you happen to visit on an unusually clear day, you can see all the way to Grenada. The fort also houses a small museum of artifacts and paintings depicting early island life and the war with the Caribs. To get there, take a taxi or bus up Fort Road from the churches.

The island of St. Vincent is not blessed with lots of spectacular white-sand shoreline, but there are two small white strands along the southern coast, just south of Kingstown, with shallow, calm water. Indian Bay Beach is about 200 yd/180 m long and is protected by an offshore reef. This place is popular with locals. Villa Beach is just south of Indian Bay. Just offshore, within easy swimming distance, is tiny Young Island, which shelters the main beach from the big Atlantic swells.

If you're looking for more seclusion, try the gray- or black-sand beaches along the west coast of the island. (St. Vincent has some of the best black-sand beaches in the Caribbean.) Petit Byahaut, a secluded valley about 3 mi/4 km north of Kingstown, is accessible only by boat (<http://www.outahere.com/petitbyahaut>). There's a 50-acre/20-hectare nature retreat with cottages, nature trails and a restaurant that serves good West Indian food. Day guests are welcome. Transport should cost about EC\$90.

Cumberland Bay, about an hour's drive north of Kingstown, is a beautiful, sweeping bay—a great place for swimming and a picnic. The 1-mi-/1.6-km-long curve of gray sandy beach is bordered by tall palm trees. Reefs along the north and south promontories are ideal for snorkeling. There is a small restaurant just steps from the water's edge.

St. Vincent also has a wealth of natural wonders within easy reach of Kingstown. By far the most popular is La Soufriere, the still-active volcano that smolders about 10 mi/16 km northeast of Kingstown (it last erupted in 1979). The volcano is an hour's ride by bus or taxi to Georgetown—from there you can rent a four-wheel-drive vehicle to get you to the trailhead, which is about 2 mi/3 km inland. The trek to the summit and back is an arduous five hours at the very minimum (you should allow a full day for this trip), but it's worth the aches and pains you'll have the next day—especially if the volcano isn't covered in clouds. Dress for wet, windy conditions. Group tours are also available.

Also on the northern end of the island are the Falls of Baleine. Water cascades over a granite outcropping, falling 60 ft/20 m into a large, clear pool below—quite spectacular. It's an ideal place for a refreshing swim and an even better spot for a picnic. Because the trails are now impassible, boats are the only means of reaching the falls, which are on the northern coast, about 20 mi/32 km north of Kingstown.

Another popular day-hike takes visitors to Trinity Falls, a triple waterfall that creates a natural whirlpool. The somewhat rough 45-minute hike begins in Richmond, about two hours north of Kingstown on the island's leeward coast, and winds through lush rain forest to a deep volcanic canyon.

Those looking for other excursions into the interior of the island can explore more than 80 mi/130 km of nature trails, including the Vermont Nature Trails that wind through Buccament Valley, about 5 mi/8 km north of Kingstown on the leeward coast. The tourism office can provide a list of tour operators and guides for such outings.

Layou Valley, which borders the Buccament Valley, used to have one of the largest petroglyphs in the Caribbean. It is no longer there, so don't believe outdated information.