

Labor of Love

A working vacation? Caribbean resorts typically seduce with luxe spas, private butlers, plush suites and promises of never having to lift a finger. For most of us, such niceties are the very definition of a tropical getaway. So why are some people going to the other extreme and choosing to pay for the privilege of doing manual labor (*yes, real work!*) on grass-roots community projects? At St. Croix's Ridge to Reef Farm, paying guests plant and tend crops, gather eggs, cook communal dinners, even herd sheep — and claim that after a few days of working the land, they feel as renewed and energized as they would after a more leisurely break. Could tilling soil and turning sod be the makings of the Caribbean vacation of a lifetime?



From preparing group dinners to harvesting fruit and vegetables, all tasks at Ridge to Reef require many hands and offer opportunities to learn about sustainable living.



Just listen,” says Nate Olive, the red-bearded visionary behind Ridge to Reef Farm. I’m about to start carving a calabash gourd, but first, Nate tells me, I need to identify which one is “calling” me. I listen but hear nothing.

I arrived just this afternoon, but this isn’t the first time I’ve questioned whether I’ll be able to embrace life in this stretch of rainforest that seven freethinkers call home. They’re convinced that these 50 acres, and their ability to support an off-the-grid, sustainable lifestyle, hold the keys to happiness. Yet I wonder if they secretly struggle at times, yearning for what lies beyond their self-made utopia. But just in case they’re right, I study the gourds more closely.

Finally, a calabash “chooses” me, and Nate hands me a Japanese pull saw. Calabashes can be reborn as bowls, instruments, even bongos, but I’ve decided that this one will become a hanging lamp. But first I must free a section from the bottom.

“The calabash becomes an extension of you,” Nate says. “It absorbs your intent and your emotion. So be really aware. Try to set an intention while you carve.”

An intention? He suggests love. Sure, every hippie believes that “all you need is love,” but can it really be that easy? Love doesn’t pay the bills, so I focus instead on concepts that do. But then I wonder if I’m missing the point and think a bit about love for good measure.

The blade gnaws through the woodlike shell, exposing rosy pink flesh and releasing wafts of sweet perfume.

“It’s a really nice air freshener. And then it’s a really bad

one,” Nate jokes of the gourd’s short shelf life.

Eagerly I stick my fingers into the pulp and get ready to sample it. But before fingers reach lips, Nate stops me. “You’re not pregnant, are you?”

When I assure him I’m not, he tells me that the bottle gourd is believed to be a bush “cure” for unwanted pregnancies. Crisis averted, I savor the yielding flesh, which is as soft as pudding and tastes just as irresistibly sweet.

When darkness settles in, Nate leaps to his feet. Like

Full Circle During downtime, talks range from how to increase your bean bounty to making the most of garden real estate. Opposite: Farm chores work up a hearty appetite — one that’s best satisfied by the fresh-from-the-farm fruit and vegetables you’ve helped to plant, tend and harvest.

Another Day in Paradise: 24 Hours Down on the Farm

1 Suit Up Wear a large hat and boots, and bring a handkerchief to wipe sweat. (Yes, you’ll sweat.)

2 Kick Off Find out what needs harvesting: beets? beans? Grab a knife and a bin and get going.



3 Tally Up Bundle and weigh the day’s yield in preparation its for sale in local farmers markets.



Why would people want to commit to a *fluorescent-lit life* when there's so much *living to be done* with the sun on your face?



Fresh-Air Fun

Even die-hard city slickers will appreciate life's simpler pleasures: the sweetness of a ripe papaya, the warmth of a just-laid egg or the earthy scent of a herb garden. Farm patriarch Nate Olive (right) is nature's steward. He's invested in everything here, from the goats and rabbits to the lush tracts of forest that surround the farm.



many farmers, he doesn't wear a watch, and the disappearing light reminds him of errands to be run. Time — and Home Depot — wait for no man.

The smell of garlic lures me toward the open-air kitchen. There, Patrick Boulger, the farm's production manager, tends a cast-iron skillet with breadfruit, kale and onions. A few of the other farmhands wander in just before dinner, announced each evening with the sounding of a conch shell. Along with the breadfruit hash, we tuck into more of nature's bounty: a hearty fish stew, crisp arugula salad with a passion-fruit dressing, and a pasta dish topped with just-picked basil leaves.

After dinner we reconvene on the porch to sip cold Heinekens under the glow of the moon. Here, stories are shared. Disillusionment from serving time at war, in school and in the corporate world have driven these men to seek sanctuary here. And now they can't fathom why people would want to commit to a fluorescent-lit life when

there's so much living to be done with the sun on your face.

Still, they're surprised that visitors pay to work beside them in the fields. Granted, duties are optional, and you can choose to do nothing more than swing in a hammock. But most guests relish this opportunity to slow down, tune into their surroundings and chill out. Working the land yields a balance with nature — a harmony that's absent from my life. I resolve to get my hands dirty.

Nobody warned me to bring my own machete. Today we'll hike the Caledonia Gut, a scramble beside the mountain stream that connects the farm to the sea. Last week Sierra Club volunteers blazed a new path, and now Nate gets to see it.

He and Matt Johnson, a towheaded college grad, wield blades big enough to scare any city kid. They cut the curtains of vines hanging from century-old trees, and when I ask why they alter this natural landscape, Nate explains

that the fast-growing ropes will inevitably strangle all life they touch. And if a hurricane swept through, they'd act like sails, catching the wind and sending trees airborne.

As we walk, Nate points out the plants and tells us about their medicinal properties. But there's another reason he and his team struggle to protect this pristine woods: The land acts like a giant sponge, filtering the rain and runoff before it finally reaches the reefs. And when we get to the water, we see for ourselves exactly how the farm impacts this watershed: The water couldn't be clearer.

"Can you hear that?" Nate asks.

I follow his gaze, and then I hear the buzz. A hummingbird wings in to drink from the cascade — a signal, perhaps, that Ridge to Reef is doing everything right. If this water is an indication, they have almost no impact on the land.

But not all of the islanders agree with Nate's green philosophies. On the way to the beach, we pass bulldozers tearing away at a mountainside. The flow of water stops

here. I ask Nate if sediment from the digging has choked the stream, but he believes the water travels underground at this point. So why not reroute the trail?

"Because we want the locals to see this," he says. "It's the only way to encourage people to speak up and ask for change."

Everything on the kitchen table is unfamiliar; even the beans have purple wings and resemble the ribbed arms of stovepipe cactus. Patrick hands me one. It's juicy and crisp, with a delicate flavor like star fruit. And when Jess Erwin cuts into a green gourd, I'm surprised to see orange inside. The West Indian pumpkin fries up soft and tastes like carrot.

The pair maneuver around each other like well-trained line cooks as the rest of us dice the produce gathered from our collective sweaty efforts in the garden earlier that day.

Patrick carefully lifts the lids of several cast-iron pots simmering on the stove and raises an eyebrow.

4 Cool Off After lunch, your workday can be done. Beach it for a swim, or join Kite St. Croix (340-643-5824) for a paddle-boarding session.



5 Eat Up When the conch calls, it's time to break bread. If inspired, show up early and cook a dish.

6 Chill Out Join an after-dinner drum circle, or ask for a lesson in gourd carving or basket making. Otherwise, just sit back and enjoy the stars.

Everything I Learned on My Working Vacation

1 Less Is More The simpler you can manage to make your life, the more contented you'll probably be.

2 Know Thyself One of the best ways to understand yourself is to understand your environment.



3 Feel the Love When you eat food made with care and love, you can't help but feel loved and cared for.

Lessons from the Farm

1 DON'T expect activities to be scheduled; the day's plan is merely a suggestion. If the sheep are loose, you may help herd them before moving on to other duties. **2 DO** play with your food. Find out which fruit and veggies are for communal consumption, then feel free to experiment. A curry-and-kale egg scramble? Delicious. **3 DO** carry a journal for jotting down notes and recipes; conversation on the farm constantly turns to food. To try: poached eggs over a bed of arugula with a side of sour cream. **4 DON'T** eat anything you haven't seen someone from the farm eat first. Some local flowers carry health risks. **5 DO** wash your own dishes and tidy up after yourself, or fear the wrath of karma.





Is it the farm that feeds our *instinct to return* to a carefree existence? As kids, we wanted to *live in tree-houses*. Here, people do.



“You make spicy; I’ll make sweet.” They’re both making curries — his with beans, Jess’ with green papaya, radish and Swiss chard — for about 30 friends of the farm who’ll show up in less than an hour. We have barely enough food for that many people, so they brainstorm. Meanwhile, I continue chopping.

Jess quickly throws together a fruit cobbler topped with a liberal splash of rum. Patrick places a pot of green bananas on the stove to boil. “Peel ’em, and they taste just like buttered baked potatoes,” he says of the unripened fruit.

Happily, the friends of the farm don’t show up empty-handed. They round out the buffet feast with a mango-avocado-papaya salsa, mushroom-topped hummus, a local concoction called bush tea, grilled salmon and many, many salads.

When at last it’s time to eat, Nate gathers us in a circle. As we all hold hands, visitors introduce themselves and the dishes they’ve contributed. At the end, we count to three before, in unison, we each yell a wish aloud. It’s the kind of raw, vulnerable moment that you might feel too self-conscious to participate in anywhere else. But at a place like this — which provides an inhospitable environment for judgment to thrive — it’s a welcome release.

“What can we say? St. Croix brings out the kid in everyone,” a sunburned Matt asserts as we pile our plates high at what feels like a tropical Thanksgiving dinner. Matt spent his day on the water, enjoying beer and beach, and is clearly feeling all the better for it.

Is he right? Is it the island or this farm that feeds our instinct to return to a simpler, more carefree existence? As children, we wanted to live in treehouses and on mountaintops. Here, people do. It’s the real world that often wrestles these childhood dreams from us, telling us that we have to conform to society’s rigid ideas of what our careers, our homes and our lives should be like.

I ponder this while washing dishes — one of the ways I’m most comfortable contributing given that I’m still learning how to whip up meals with foreign ingredients. As the wineglasses and plates air-dry, I rejoin the party.

The group is now sprawled on the grassy knoll just in front of the kitchen. One of the guests has pulled up the Sky Walk app on an iPad and guides us through tonight’s



Off the Clock Sunset marks the end of the workday for residents (guests can opt to work less), and when everyone gathers in the community center, it’s not just for dinner but also for crafts, music making and lively conversation on the porch.

constellations. Light pollution is blissfully absent here, and the celestial canvas above perfectly matches the computer’s rendering of an ideal sky.

As we ooh and aah over the constellations and an occasional shooting star, I realize I can’t remember the last time I studied the heavens. Then I spot something a bit worrisome: an orange glow, gaining in intensity. I’m tempted to ask if there’s a power plant nearby. But it’s simply the moonrise — a natural occurrence I’ve never witnessed and now find absolutely mesmerizing.

This place has none of the creature comforts of a mega-hotel or cruise ship: no TV, no casinos, no activities director. Just the moon slowly rising above the mahogany trees. And that’s all that I need.



Get Here Carriers including American Airlines and JetBlue offer frequent flights to St. Croix.

Stay Here Tent space, shared dormitories, private cabanas and simple villas start at \$35 per person per night. 340-220-0466; visfi.org

Play Here Conquer the rainforest’s rolling and muddy terrain with a four-wheel-drive vehicle from Budget car rental. 340-778-9636