

Crime? You are more likely to be killed by a flying coconut

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crystal-clear waters to the disappointing quality of the tea.

In stark contrast to Richard, I love everything about Guadeloupe, where the show is filmed. I knew nothing about the island before I signed up for the role so the first thing I did was search for it on Google, and up popped these wonderful photos of a tropical Eden. Actually, I have to say that the photos online of Guadeloupe don't really do it justice because there's so much more variation to it than just white beaches and palm trees.

The southernmost nation in the Leeward Islands, Guadeloupe comprises two main islands: Basse-Terre and Grande-Terre. They are separated by a narrow sea channel called Salt River.

Guadeloupe is shaped like a butterfly. Basse-Terre – the left wing of the butterfly, if you like – is quite flat, almost like a desert island. Volcanic Grande-Terre, the right wing, is mountainous and covered in rainforest, while the entire coastline boasts a ribbon of pristine sand.

GUADELOUPE is actually a department of France and therefore a part of the European Union – that's something that surprises many first-time visitors. The euro is the island's official currency.

Sit at a cafe in the resort of St Francois on Grande-Terre and you could imagine you're on the Cote d'Azur. There's a marina and rows of bistros, while handsome holiday-makers wander the streets with designer jumpers draped over their shoulders.

We film *Death In Paradise* mostly on Grande-Terre. The locals grow all kinds of produce, including coconuts and glorious mangos. At the top of the volcano is a national park with incredible waterfalls and wonderfully lush vegetation.

I love the contrasts between the two halves of Guadeloupe. And there are other smaller satellite islands to admire as well, such as Marie-Galante and a lovely collection of islands called Les Saintes.

I've seen a lot of Guadeloupe through filming but I've seen much more by venturing out on my own. For example, after hearing about Les Saintes I decided to take a look for myself.

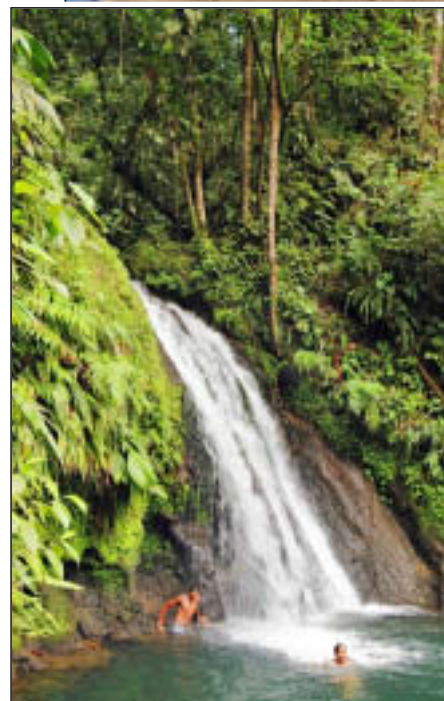
These islands were originally settled by Bretons, so essentially what you have is a Breton fishing village in the middle of the Caribbean. Amazing.

This area is also a paradise for divers. The renowned Jacques Cousteau described the waters surrounding Guadeloupe as one of the top diving spots in the world.

Snorkelling here is the most extraordinary experience. The sea



ON THE CASE: Ben and Sara in a scene from the TV drama, and one of the country's spectacular waterfalls, right



is very calm and the marine life is carefully monitored by various conservation groups so that the coral, fish and other sea creatures are allowed to thrive.

Death In Paradise is now in its second series – the first of eight

episodes was screened last week. For the first series, I stayed in a villa that turned out to be a bit lonely. This time around I stayed with other members of the cast and crew in the Fort Royal Hotel, just outside Deshaies, on Basse. It was a much

more enjoyable experience and we had a great time.

While each series takes six months to film, I don't spend the entire time on Guadeloupe. I like to return to Britain briefly every two or three weeks to see my young children.

One downside is that the journey is a little difficult because there are no direct flights – I travel with Air France via Paris.

Most holidaymakers in Guadeloupe are French, although you see some Scandinavians too. There are lots of nice hotels in and around St Francois and St Anne.

Viewers of *Death In Paradise* get a slightly distorted view of crime on the island. I'm not sure how many murders there are every year in Guadeloupe, but there certainly aren't as many as there are in the show – and they are never as bizarre as we portray.

For example, in one episode, a bride was killed by a psychopath brandishing a harpoon gun! That was certainly a case to test the mental powers of Richard and his non-sense colleague, Detective Sergeant Camille Bordey, played by Sara Martins.

In my opinion, falling coconuts present far more of a hazard than

harpoon guns. During filming one day, I was standing near a tree when a coconut flew off in a gust of wind and narrowly missed me. I don't think I would have survived if it had hit me on the head.

I'm not joking when I say that coconut trees are very dangerous. *Death by coconut?* Sounds like a potential storyline.

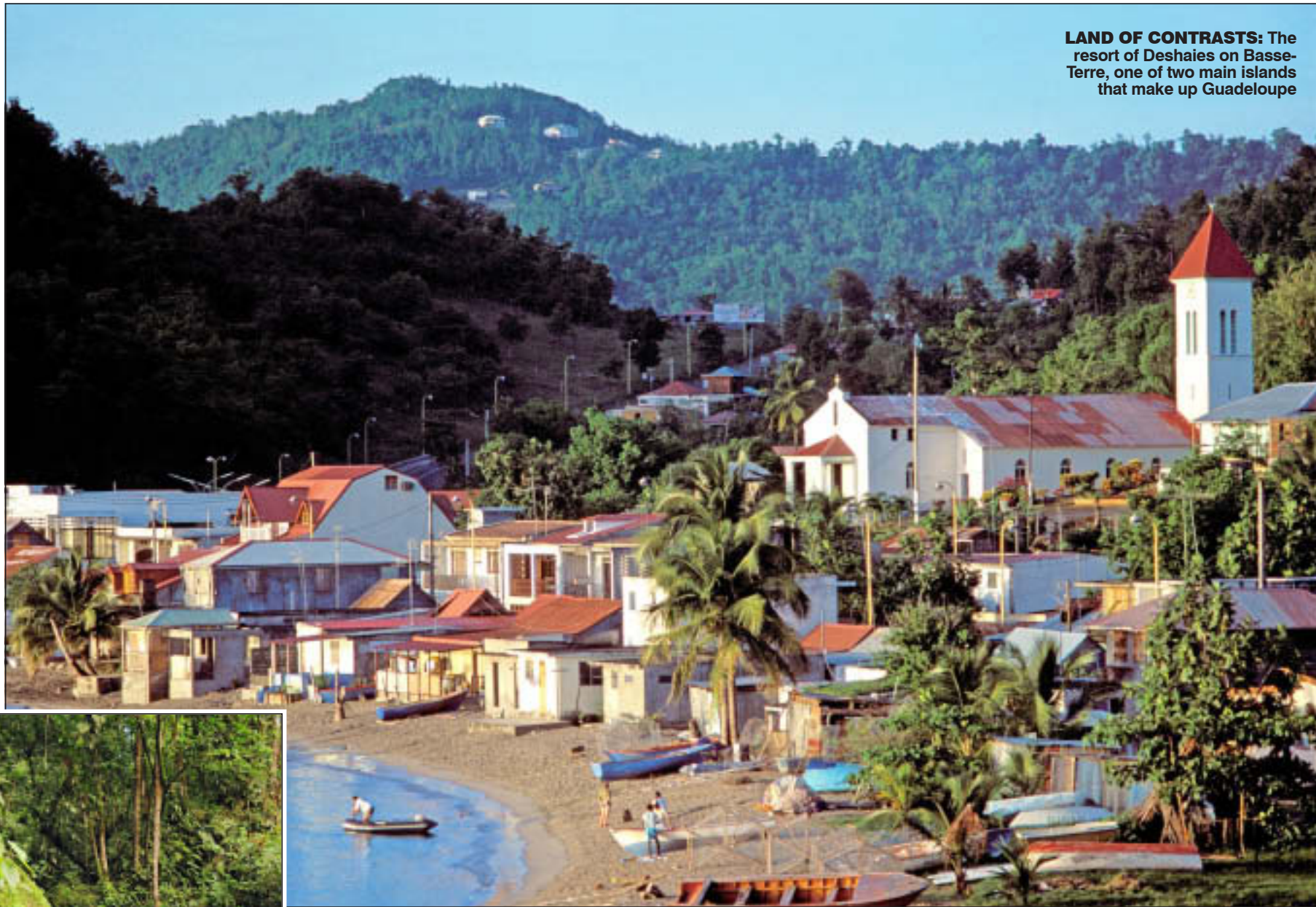
I would certainly recommend Guadeloupe as a holiday destination. One of the many things on the must-do list for visitors is a trip to La Soufriere, at the top of the volcano. You should also go to St Francois and see the marina, and I would definitely advise a trip to Les Saintes.

IF YOU like swimming, take a dip in a waterfall. There's a great one near Deshaies but you can find them all over Guadeloupe. A swim in one of the waterfalls in the rainforest is an amazing experience.

I also enjoyed taking a boat trip from Deshaies. You can go from here to the Jacques Cousteau Reserve in Bouillante, which is also worth a look. While you are there, take the opportunity to swim with turtles and see the coral reef.

Having a base in Guadeloupe has allowed me to visit other Caribbean islands during some down-time. I learned quickly that there's really no such thing as a typical Caribbean

LAND OF CONTRASTS: The resort of Deshaies on Basse-Terre, one of two main islands that make up Guadeloupe



Train vs plane on our wacky race to the Alps

By Neil English

I HAVE a competitive streak, so if somebody challenges me to race I accept if I expect to win.

When asked to race my ski industry buddy to the Alps, him travelling by train, myself by plane, it was a no-brainer. Even though I savour fond memories of travelling to ski holidays as a child by train, it was always far slower (though cheaper) than air.

Daniel, founder of ski train travel company Snowcarbon, said the winner would be whoever first made it into the outdoor hot tub, with glass of champagne in hand, at his chosen chalet in the French resort of Meribel Village.

I knew that Fish & Pips, the modest-sized company operating that chalet, had a fine reputation for homely hospitality and fine food. So there was really nothing to dissuade me from competing and claiming my prize.

Daniel wanted to film the race. This meant travelling with a cameraman sticking a large lens in my face. But still there was no doubt I would win.

I even grew to like my cameraman, Jonathan Thompson, who somehow gazed through close-up lenses at my ugly mug for a whole day to make a five-minute film.

I will not reveal the result, save to tell you it certainly surprised me. You can witness our efforts at www.mailsonSunday.co.uk/racetoesnow.

Any ski holiday with Fish & Pips will not disappoint. They have five chalets in this attractive satellite of the Three



JOURNEY'S END: Neil flew to the ski resort of Meribel in France

Valleys at 4,593ft altitude. It is a great way to ski the world-famous network of 400 miles of pistes. With the main chairlift just 200ft away, it was possible to ski back directly to the door.

Fresh croissants and baguettes as well as cooked breakfasts will set you up for a long, hard day on the slopes. Tea, freshly baked cake and a log fire await at the end of the day. Then choose a massage, snooze or lounge in the hot tub before the award-winning evening feast with unlimited wine.

Fish & Pips take their food and wine seriously. A rigorous selection process takes place, judged by discerning professionals, each summer. And founding partner Holly Fisher says the guests enjoy their wine so much that 'we've

had to order an extra 500 bottles for the past two seasons since our clients are not going out so much. Instead they choose to stay in the chalets after dinner, drinking, reading, watching DVDs, playing games or listening to music.'

'It's a real sign of the times,' adds Holly. 'We'd much rather our clients still come on their annual ski holiday, even if we have to provide more wine.'

Fish & Pips has a strong link with Marmalade Ski School, whose highly skilled instructors helped me get the most out of this exciting ski area.

I took a couple of extra days to sample Europe's highest five-star designer hotel in Val Thorens, just seven miles from Meribel. Located at 7,545ft, the Altapura hotel is owned by the Sibuet family, who have a wealth of experience running luxurious, traditional farm houses for wealthy clients. But I found the character of this new smoked glass and steel building in keeping with the staff – austere and charmless.

Hopefully it will improve with age as Val Thorens is a wonderful resort deserving of a five-star establishment.

GETTING THERE

Snowcarbon.co.uk offers unrivalled advice and range of ski holidays by train. **Fish and Pips** (0845 4741054, fishandpips.co.uk) offers seven nights at Chalet Braye in Meribel Village from February 9 from £795 with breakfast, dinner and wine. **EasyJet** (easyjet.co.uk) flies from Gatwick from £80.98pp. Airport transfers from £61pp at 3vt.co.uk. **The Altapura** (0033 480388036, altapura.fr) has rooms from £259 a night half-board.

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LATE DEALS OF THE WEEK

BARGAIN BEST FAMILY DEAL
TAKE the family to the three-star Castelos Da Rocha apartments in Praia da Rocha on the Algarve, departing May 7. Prices start at £660 for a ten-night stay for two adults and two children under 14, with flights from Gatwick, if booked by the end of the month. Call 01244 529265 or visit holidaygems.co.uk.

BARGAIN BEST CRUISE
A CRUISE to the Canary Islands costs from £439pp for departures in January and February. Norwegian Spirit departs from Barcelona and also calls at Madeira during the nine-night voyage. The price includes return flights from London and full-board accommodation. Call 0844 556 6060 or go to dialflight.com.

BARGAIN BEST SELF-CATERING
TWO nights in a cosy cottage at Tan-Y-Lan Fach in Carmarthenshire costs from £50 per couple arriving January 25. The property, which sleeps two, has stunning views over the River Towy at Llangain. Call 01267 241 579 or visit tanylanwelshcottage.co.uk.

BARGAIN BEST CAMPING BOOK by the end of this month and you can enjoy seven nights in a three-bedroom mobile home at a campsite at Raguenes in Brittany from £159 for up to six people. The price is valid for departures in May and includes ferry crossings for car and occupants. Call 01233 629950 or go to venueholidays.co.uk.

BARGAIN BEST ALL-INCLUSIVE
GRAB some winter sun at the four-star Royal Kenz in the Tunisian resort of Port El Kantaoui. It has a spa, indoor pool and tennis courts and the break costs from £251pp for seven nights departing Gatwick on January 30. Call 0800 916 5173 or visit latelateals.co.uk.

GETTING THERE

Club Med (08453 670 670, clubmed.co.uk) offers seven nights at Club Med La Caravelle in Grande-Terre, Guadeloupe, from £1,435 per person on an all-inclusive basis, including flights and transfers. **Caribbean Expressions** (01752 878010, expressionsholidays.co.uk) offers seven nights' B&B in a garden marina suite at La Cocoteraie on Grande-Terre from £1,580pp, including return Air France flights.

● The second series of *Death In Paradise* is on Tuesdays on BBC1. The first series is available on DVD.

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