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TNS/Stuart Leavenworth

The river winds its way to the sea in Taroko Gorge National Park on the eastern side of Taiwan. This national park receives millions of visitors each year and is easy to access.

EASTERN ASIA

A warm welcome

Hospitality rules on the gentle, generous island of Taiwan, especially in areas like Beitou



TNS/Stuart Leavenworth

Shoppers converge on Beitou's Sunday farmers market. Beitou is generally a quiet village of hot springs spas, but its Sunday market gets pretty crowded.

BY STUART LEAVENWORTH
McClatchy Washington Bureau

There's a simple trick to meeting people in Taiwan — just look lost. Pull out a map on a street corner and stare at your smartphone with an expression of befuddlement, and sure enough, someone will stop and ask if you need help. It happened so many times during a recent week spent there that it became a running joke. These offers of assistance almost inevitably led to extended conversations with our good Samaritans in a fumbling mix of English and Chinese. They were intrigued to know where we were from and what we thought of their home, a place the Portuguese named “Isla Formosa,” or beautiful island. For more than a century, Taiwan has been known as a generous welcomer of outsiders, and the tradition continues. Possibly because their future is so precarious — living on land claimed by China, with a democratic government unrecognized by most of the world's nations — the Taiwanese take great pride in greeting people and showing off their culture. Beitou, an old village absorbed into Taipei, the country's capital, is a fine

place to experience Taiwan's warmth. It practically bubbles right out of the ground. Just a 30-minute subway ride from the center of downtown Taipei, Beitou is the epicenter of hot springs on an island that is steaming with geothermal activity. You can pay top dollar to visit a luxury resort, or just take your shoes off and soak your feet in one of the brooks that tumble down the hillsides. Back when Japan controlled Taiwan, the area around Beitou Park was one of the largest spas in Asia, filled with taverns, music halls and houses of ill repute. During the Vietnam War, American soldiers helped turn Beitou into a notorious red-light district. Then, Taiwan banned prostitution in the late 1970s and Beitou languished for a while, but it is coming back strong — this time, serving a different kind of clientele. Today, visitors from mainland China arrive in tour buses to fill the resorts that ring Beitou Park. Yet in the maze of back alleys that radiate from the park, village life continues, with a bohemian twist. Starting four years ago, a group of

SEE TAIWAN, 12D

On Grenada, Sandals steps up its luxury-resort game

Experiencing Caribbean pampering on “Spice Island”
Many visitors never leave the company's luxurious, 17-acre digs
Island fun includes scuba diving, monkey watching and overeating

BY DEBBRA DUNNING BROUILLETTE
Special to the Star-Telegram
In the southwest corner of the Caribbean, situated between Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and the twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago, deter-

mined beach vacationers gravitate to the lush, volcanic island of Grenada. Until the past decade, the 133-square-mile island was known more for growing, processing and exporting nutmeg and other spices than attracting tourists. But after Hurricane Ivan devastated the island in 1984, destroying homes, buildings and its valuable crops, efforts to develop tourism increased. After all, a nutmeg sapling takes eight years or more to bear fruit and hotels can be built far more quickly. I enjoyed a brief stay on the “Spice Island” back in 2001 following a small-ship sailing cruise, which began and ended at Grenada's picturesque horse-shoe-shaped harbor overlooking the capital city of St. George's. Through the years, my husband and I have become huge fans of Caribbean vacationing, and we favor locally owned resorts rather than hotel chains. On a recent trip back to Grenada, however, we decided to deviate from our usual routine and try Sandals LaSource Grenada Resort and Spa. Following its March 2014 opening, I'd read about its ultra-luxurious all-inclusive amenities — personal butlers, suites

SEE RESORT, 13D



Sandals Resorts

Three themed villages on Sandals LaSource Grenada's 17-acre property access the scenic Pink Gin Beach, which is named for its rose-tinged sand.



Sandals Resorts

Many visitors come for the pampering at Sandals LaSource Grenada, where luxurious amenities range from suites with infinity-edge pools to personal butlers.

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RESORT

with infinity-edge pools and unlimited everything, from drinks to dining to diving the coral reefs. A multimillion-dollar expansion transformed the former spa-centric, 100-room LaSource resort over a 10-month period into its much larger 227-room version — set on Pink Gin Beach, so named for its rose-tinged sand. Since the original Sandals opened in 1981 in Montego Bay, Jamaica, the resort chain has dominated the luxury all-inclusive market in the Caribbean with a current total of 14 resorts — seven in Jamaica; three in St. Lucia; one each in Antigua, Bahamas and Grenada; and most recently, Barbados.

The brand boasts of a high percentage of repeat visitors and an audience that often seems more interested in on-site pampering than island explorations. Of course, we were ready for doses of both. Sandals’ three themed villages set on 17 acres offered a mind-boggling selection of rooms and suites, but we finally opted for a suite in the South Seas Village complete with a private plunge pool, heated whirlpool and butler service.

SAVOR THE FLAVORS

As the designated foodie in our household, I was also eager for a culinary exploration courtesy of the resort’s eight sit-down restaurants, which cover a range of flavors and styles. We began our foodie week at the classically French Le Jardinier.

There and elsewhere, every effort is made to accommodate all special dietary requests. Other worthy choices included a specialty steakhouse, two Japanese restaurants (one specializing in sushi, the other Teppanyaki tableside cooking), Italian, Caribbean, Mediterranean seafood and an authentic English pub. There was also a selection of casual fare, such as a pizzeria, a hotdog stand and a French bakery, which we rarely passed without stopping in for nutmeg ice cream and a cookie or two.

After dinner, we usually gravitated to a comfy couch in an area called the Living Room to enjoy the evening’s themed entertainment. A daily schedule

on our room TV kept us informed about special events such as wine tastings and cocktail parties.

DIVING AND SNORKELING IN GRENADA’S UNDERWATER SCULPTURE PARK

All Sandals Resorts offer unlimited diving with equipment and guided boat dives included — a big plus for certified scuba divers, since scuba diving can be an expensive hobby.

We spent most of our mornings diving, exploring healthy reefs and coral-encrusted shipwrecks like the Bianca C, a 600-foot cruise liner known as the Titanic of the Caribbean.

A highlight was being able to dive Grenada’s Underwater Sculpture Park, which opened in 2006. While divers swim among the 100 sculptures, these can also be viewed by snorkelers and from a glass-bottom boat, since they are in shallow depths from 5 to 30 feet under the surface.

A circle of life-sized figures holding hands, cast from local children, is the most impressive of the sculptures, spread throughout half a mile of the protected marine area.

EXPERIENCE THE ISLE OF SPICE

When you’re ready for

some new scenery, don’t miss exploring the Spice Island through Island Routes Caribbean Adventures tours.

Sampler tours (\$59 half-day, \$105 full day) include stops in the capital of St George’s, as well as historic Fort Frederick, Annandale Waterfall, Grand Anse Beach (a 2-mile swath of golden sand shaded by seagrape trees) and Grand Etang National Park’s crater lake.

Mona monkeys, found only on Grenada outside of West Africa, are often sighted around the Grand Etang Preserve area. We were able to observe them and take photographs, thanks to our tour guide, who spotted them in trees next to the road.

Full-day tours include lunch and a tour of the Belmont Chocolate Estate, where cocoa beans are processed for making some of the world’s finest organic dark chocolate bars at the Grenada Chocolate Company.

Other tours can be booked for sport fishing, river tubing and other island adventures. Rum lovers will enjoy touring River Antoine Rum Distillery, where rum has been distilled from sugar cane since 1785.

So, what’s not included?

Wines by the bottle (not included among selected Robert Mondavi wines), spa services, laundry and dry cleaning, professional sunset photo shoots, scuba diving certification courses and island tours.

If you go

Daily flights into Grenada’s Maurice Bishop International Airport (GND) from Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) connect through Miami (MIA).

Sandals offers discounted rates up to 65 percent off and other specials throughout the year. A recent sale rate started at \$340 per person and included incentives such as a free night, free couples massage, a sunset cruise and air credits. www.sandals.com.

For more information on vacationing in Grenada, visit <http://grenadagrenadines.com>.



Special to the Star-Telegram/Debbra Dunning Brouillette

Found only on Grenada outside of West Africa, mona monkeys are often sighted on island tours.



Special to the Star-Telegram/Debbra Dunning Brouillette

Grenada’s Underwater Sculpture Park includes 100 sculptures, including this circle of life-size figures cast from local children.

Advertorial

TRAVEL COLUMN

Seine River Cruise Adventure!

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Plus, these ships are able to navigate the rivers of the world and get right into ports at which larger ships cannot even dock. Most river cruises also include all sightseeing shore tours, wine with dinner, and many other amenities not available on regular cruise ships

Join Tom & Rita Paul of Pauls’ Cruises & Travel for another one of their exciting VIPP Adventures – on the Seine River – from Paris (roundtrip)- for 8 days - sailing July 29, 2016.

Begin in the magical “City of Light” – Paris- where you will embark on your luxurious river cruise ship – the AmaLegro. (An optional 3 nt. package with airfare, hotel and tour will be available soon).

Visit the village of Giverny, where Monet lived and worked for 43 years, and Honfleur, a charming French harbor town immortalized by generations of artists. Stroll through Rouen, the historic capital of Normandy, then take an unforgettable excursion to the famous Normandy beaches of WWII. Visit Les Andelys, home of Château Gaillard and Malmaison, home of Napoleon & Josephine and more.

Plus time to enjoy joy the fabulous wines from France’s great wine regions onboard too (all complimentary)!

Long renowned for their exceptional service, the AmaLegro carries only 150 passengers, 74 staterooms, allowing for totally dedicated & personalized service. Each beautifully appointed cabin features European style duvets with feather pillows & eiderdowns. All cabins oceanview.

Your 7 nt. cruise includes:

- Fine dining includes 6 MEALS daily (breakfast, bouillon, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner, midnight snack.)
- Unlimited WINE, BEER & soft drinks served complimentary with dinner.
- SHORE EXCURSIONS included in every port of call!
- Free Wi-Fi internet & TV.
- Cooking demonstrations, theme dinners, special shows, lecture series, evening piano music & more!
- Personally escorted by Tom & Rita Paul for guaranteed fun!

Visit their website www.PaulsCruises.com for a color flyer and more details – but call them soon before reserved space is gone! Or visit either agency location - In the Mid-Cities @ 941 Melbourne, se of NE Mall (Subway shopping strip)- 817-589-SHIP (7447). In the Arlington-Mansfield area @ 5767 SW Green Oaks (se corner of I20) – 817-572-PAUL (7285). Outside the DFW metroplex 800-327-3533.

E-Mail: Info@PaulsCruises.com, or visit their website and sign up for special savings alert and travel buys at www.PaulsCruises.com. Or ask about other exciting River Cruise offers available this year!

