


the **LONG** way.

- to -

BOILING LAKE

The Caribbean's supposed to be sun and fun, right?
Not when you're an *adventure* traveler.

BY ROD DAVIS



Life is littered with omens. The pilgrimage to Boiling Lake produced a Hefty bag's worth, but one especially I should not have overlooked was the woman in a lime-green jumpsuit who was sobbing, slumped over the wing of the seven-seater island hopper parked outside the St. Croix terminal. She could have been crying for any of a half-dozen reasons — we were very late, the storm out of San Juan had left us all ashen, her husband was a dork. What finally got her was the pilot's plan to leave our luggage behind ("We'll get it to you tomorrow") to accommodate two new passengers. All she wanted to do was get to St. Maarten for a second honeymoon, and now she wouldn't even have a change of underwear. It just wasn't worth it. Funny how often that sentiment would figure in my

thinking in the days to come.

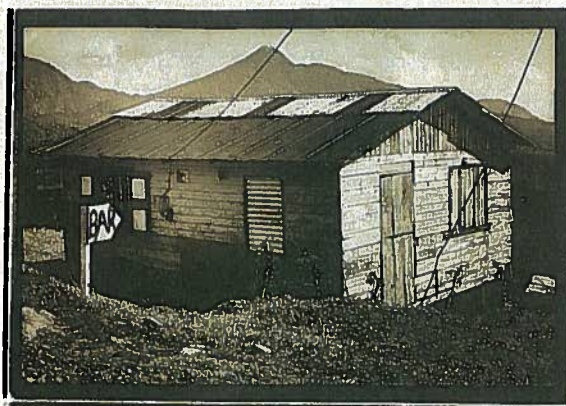
The pilot saw how this could all get very ugly. The diplomatic way out was to stash our suitcases in storage compartments located in the wings, thus taking both people and property. So we got to St. Maarten, dropped off the reprising honeymooners — she was now smiling — and filled the gas tanks for the final leg of the afternoon-long trip. Our destination was Dominica (pronounced Do-min-EE-ca so not to be confused with the Dominican Republic), a 289-square-mile tropical island of only 75,000 people in the Lesser Antilles, between Guadeloupe and Martinique.

You've probably never heard of the place. I hadn't either until a woman I had met a year earlier on the island of Nevis (which you've also probably never heard of) said I should visit Dominica to see the famous Boiling Lake. It was incredible, she said, and she knew the meaning of the word. I re-



DANIEL D. MORRISON

The climb to Boiling Lake



Bar above Roky's



Getting directions



Fording a stream

The quip that “no white man had gone to Boiling Lake without a guide, and lived” became not a warning, but an enticement.



solved to go. Finding more about it was difficult — Dominica is so obscure that hotel managers from Nevis use the island when *they* want to get away from it all. But I learned enough to be convinced I wanted to go, no matter how much trouble.

I say this to be candid. I'm not blaming my experience on anything or anybody, or on the island itself — an almost virginal microcosm of rain and cloud forest, a place where the World Wildlife Fund works with farmers and foresters to preserve habitats, and where RARE, the Center for Tropical Bird Conservation, is helping the government protect the Sisserou and red-necked parrot species, both unique to the island. I got into this of free will and despite numerous possible exits. Even deep into the folly, when a dozen Dominicans insisted photographer Dan Morrison and I should not undertake (I use the word deliberately) the hike to Boiling Lake without a guide, I sneered. The quip that “no white man had gone in without a guide, and lived” — albeit from a man who wanted a \$30 guide fee to keep us out of the history books — became not a warning but an enticement. A three-hour jaunt in and three more out? Boiling Lake was a piece of

cake. If someone had accidentally stepped off the unmarked path and put his foot through the pumice crust into lava or super-heated water or whatever and gotten burned, well, some tourists were always poking around where they shouldn't be.

We got to Dominica at nightfall, just before the airport shut down due to darkness. Clarence Butler, director of the Ross University Veterinary School at Dominica, one of the passengers for whom we nearly had to leave our luggage, helped me clear customs and obtain a temporary driver's license, but it was too late to rent a car. Dan and I also said goodbye to J.J. Earhart of RARE, who had flown in for a week of field work, and got a cab. We bounced along a narrow, potholed road threading the side of a dormant volcano, one of many that define the Dominican landscape, to the Papillote Hotel. A late meal awaited, as did the first of what would be several bad nights' sleeps. I can't fault the Papillote, an earth-motherish inn heavy on rusticity and charm and almost hidden among the rain-forest foliage next to the spectacular twin jungle rivers that form Trafalgar Falls. I could blame it on the mosquitoes, the residual hangover from San Juan or the roosters that went crazy long before dawn. Or



Locals on the trail to Titou Gorge



Vally of Desolation

Trail to the Valley of Desolation

Looking down into the steaming Valley of Desolation, I ask myself a simple question: Why the [expletive deleted] am I doing this?



maybe it was the unconscious feeling that I was about to do something really stupid — more or less on the basis of a stray remark from a woman on a beach.

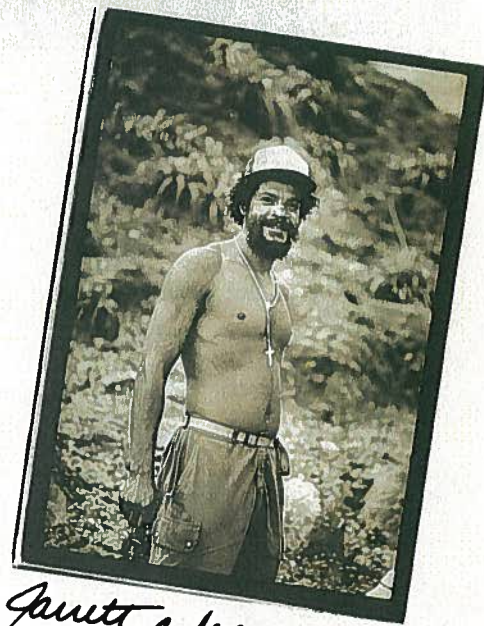
Thirty-six hours later — looking down a rain-slickened precipice into the Valley of Desolation, a steaming sluice of belching caverns of sulfurous fumes — I expressed my motivation in the form of a question. Repetition made it my mantra: “Why the [expletive deleted] am I doing this?”

One reason was faith in the written word. I'd read up on the place. Jonathan Runge's Caribbean guide, *Rum and Reggae*, calls the hike to Boiling Lake something “you'll never forget.” It's muddy, he says, and tricky, and “you won't recognize your Reeboks after this one — hiking boots are better.” He recommends a guide, but also suggests checking with the Dominican Forest Service before hiking in the nearby Boeri Lake region, in case you run into Dreads (mountain people) or just get lost. I figured him for cautious. Of course, he also says that on the hike to Boiling Lake “there are no cliff faces to climb.” But that's what I had to go on. Also Cyndy and Sam Morreale's *West Indies in 22 Days*, which describes the trek as “interesting if you like hot, sweaty hiking.” Since that approximates the kind of physical

sensation I enjoy, I figured I had the information I needed.

Moreover, Boiling Lake lay within a vast national park, the kind of place you rarely find in Third World countries. And unlike some other Caribbean islands that tend to be flat or covered with vegetation suitable for raising sugar cane and resorts, Dominica is primordial, a real-life Skull Island (King Kong's kingdom). Eruptions beginning 26 million years ago (the most recent in 1880) pushed it up from the sea in a labyrinth of volcanic cones and jagged thrusts of earthen crust. Nature covered it with clouds and rain, and the chunk of rock lay thick with the greenery about which botanists dream. Water was pushed up from underground, too, lacing the island with hundreds of rivers — one for every day of the year, they say — and the forest filled with birds and insects, reptiles and small mammals. Very Darwinian.

Later came the Carib Indians, and after that social Darwinism — Europeans (French and English) who used musket and cannon to carry out survival of the fittest, nearly exterminating the Caribs (today Dominica is the only island with surviving members of the West Indian tribe) and also wreaking damage on each other. The French and English fought for decades. Eventually, the English got landlord



Juvett, a local guide

Another as a trail potato



**Rain — cold and
slashing — had
left us crouching
inside aluminum
thermal blankets.
We looked like
baked potatoes
with hats.**



rights, ruling the place in the usual manner of colonials. In 1979 — the same year it was devastated by Hurricane David, which killed 40 people and stripped “every leaf from every tree, like it had been hit by locusts,” one resident said — Dominica attained independence. It remains linked to the Commonwealth economically, and sells almost all of its banana crop, the leading export, to the U.K. The official language is English, but your ear hears the West Indian dialect. Or French patois, which black Dominicans — who make up 90 percent of the population — speak when they don’t want you to know what an idiot they think you are for going to Boiling Lake on your own.

To warm up for the jaunt, Dan and I went into Roseau, the island’s hubbubless capital, and rented a car — an adventure unto itself. After encountering what I can most charitably describe as a less-than-enthusiastic-though-not-actually-hostile attitude toward foreigners, we got out of town, heading for Laudat, a village located in the middle of the southern half of the island and near the Boiling Lake trailhead. We checked into Roxy’s, which for some reason had been recommended. A slim, laconic Dominican who once drove cabs in Chicago, Roxy had re-

Boiling Lake

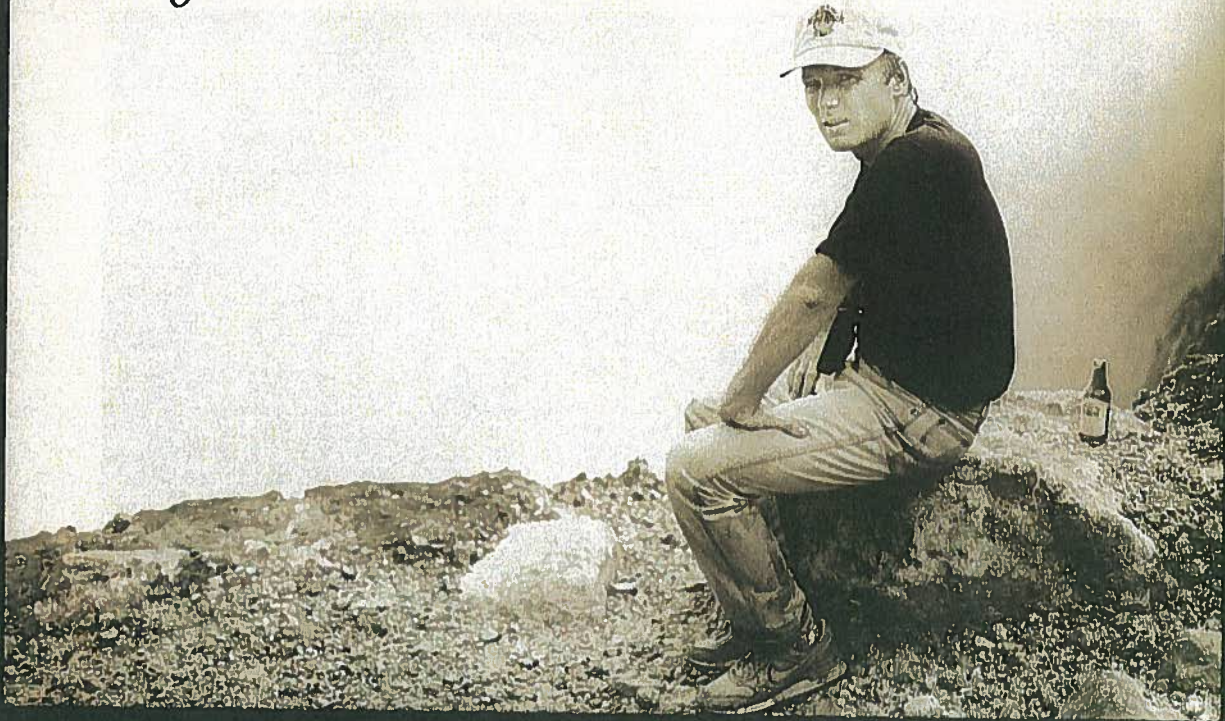


turned home and taken over the budget hostel after the death of his father. He was about half pleased with his new line of work. The seven or eight rooms were Spartan. The hot water in the shower room wasn’t currently working, Roxy said, and the swimming pool out front was too dirty to use, and the bar downstairs was still under construction, and supper would be boiled fish, rice and beans. It was a steal for \$30 per night.

Dan and I stowed our gear. It was still early in the afternoon, so we drove the “road” leading to Morne Trois Pitons (Mountain of Three Peaks) National Park, which includes at its upper end two lakes, Freshwater and Boeri, separated by the Morne Micotrin volcano (which last rumbled in 1975). At the lower end of the park is Boiling Lake, preceded by the Valley of Desolation and Grand Soufrière Valley (Hot Springs).

A two-hour roundtrip hike along Grand Fond Trail links Freshwater Lake (2,800 feet) to Boeri Lake (3,000 feet). I figured it for a miniversion of the Boiling Lake route, a good warm-up. Actually, Grand Fond was a comparative stroll around the rim of Morne Micotrin (4,006 feet) on a path with relatively few places to maim yourself.

Waiting for a bubble



Back at Freshwater Lake, Dan and I climbed into the Mazda to return to Laudat. Then Dan climbed out to remove a boulder from the roadway and smirk as I tried to maneuver the car amid deep ruts, a sheer drop-off and a smidgeon of asphalt, which scraped the oil pan as the car bounced over the ruts and cut into the bald rear tires. Later the roadway widened to nearly half a lane.

We saw a small hut to the right. A hand-lettered sign said, "Bar." I stopped. The barman, a moonlighting cop, greeted us with a smile and two Heinekens. I mentally recanted everything I'd been thinking about the island. A few local men came in and tuned the radio to the cricket match between the West Indian all-star team and India, broadcast in English, the grand historical-cultural-imperialist symbolism of which I found far too extravagant to completely absorb at the time. Mostly I was looking at my map of the island with the barman and his son, plotting the Boiling Lake assault.

"You will need a guide," the barman said. I said no, that I thought it would be cheating. He laughed. "You can find your way," he said, "but be very careful." He said it like a disclaimer. Then we went outside and he showed me

how to get to the trail head. I asked him what it was like to be a cop here, since it probably would be impossible to find a criminal up in the jungle. "But on the island," he said, "everyone helps. Everyone knows where everyone is." Knowing where you are, I contemplated the following day, isn't necessarily a source of comfort.

Throughout the evening I heard rain and wind. About the time I fell asleep, around 5 a.m., the church bells across the road began ringing for early Mass.

At 6:30, Roxy, responding to my note on the sink to please have breakfast, ready about 7 a.m., did just that. Fried eggs and coffee sat on the dining room table getting cold. I could see he had a lot better temperament for a Chicago cabbie than a hotelier.

Later, I finished dressing and walked outside. Roxy was smiling at a solid, slate-gray mass of clouds over the mountain peaks in the direction we were heading. "It's only a little rain, mon," he said. "You don't want to wait too long to start."

To reach the Boiling Lake trail head at the base of Titou Gorge, you first must negotiate the water sluice that leads to it. The locals do it all the time

You could feel the heat as you approached the precipice. Looking down over the edge, I thought how much I'd hate to fall in.



At the base of Mount Nicotia



The odor of the jungle was all around, the smell of rot, of fermenting nature — and of a couple of bats.



to reach the hot and cold falls that collect there into a pool. But early in the morning when it's pouring and you're not ready for balancing a quarter-mile along an 8-inch-wide trough ledge with 10-foot drop-offs, you feel put upon. Omenized. But no slip-ups, and we got to the trail head.

A series of increasingly vertical steps surrounded by vines and foliage too thick to see through led up to the lair of Kong. We encountered some local teen-agers, all of whom knew we were staying at Roxy's and all of whom knew we weren't using a guide. We waved off their offers to provide us last-minute expertise. Hell, two years ago, Dan and I walked for 22 hours into and out of the mouth of the crater of Mount St. Helens. This would be like kindergarten.

The first hour of the hike was like walking through a mountainous southern Louisiana. The foliage was thick but not impenetrable and the humidity was 800 percent. But the going was OK. You could tell this was once an English island because the trail already bore evidence of a schizophrenic attitude toward nature: On the one hand, it's a garden; on the other hand, anarchy. The garden personality was created by setting log-and-plank steps

for much of the first two-thirds of the trail, and then at maddeningly odd points later on. The plank-steps proved, like British rule, of ambivalent value — they were helpful in the mud, but also forced your natural gait into the kind of pace you'd set walking on ladder rungs. The anarchy came when you had learned to rely on the rungs only to find they had stopped and you were left to pick your own way — much like post-colonial independence.

The unpredictability of the steps was among the chief reasons much of the journey in was marked by suspicion. Were we going the right way? Would we just keep walking through jungle till a new guidebook was published? Were members of Boiling Lake Guides Local 121 running relays ahead of us to change markers and plant false trail steps? We got to a rare clearing, about 50 meters in length, and heard voices from behind. Turning, I saw a half-dozen Dominicans led by one young man carrying a knife with a 6- or 7-inch-long open blade. He passed and I said hello. Then the others trooped by, an arm's length away. Each looked me directly in the eye. I pretended not to be with Dan, who was slung all over with cameras. Tourist geek. Typical American. Last in line was a Rasta with

BOILING LAKE

one arm cut off below the elbow. Later I would see him standing in the hot stream near Boiling Lake dousing his dreadlocks in the water and whooping with either pain or delight. For now, he smiled and they moved on at a fast pace.

We gave them another 10 minutes of lead time. It wouldn't do to have them think we were using them as unpaid guides. As it turned out, they stayed so far ahead the only times I was sure we were on their trail was when I could detect their footprints in the mud or peeled grapefruit skins in the brush — the purpose, after all, of the blade.

Once the group had passed and disappeared, it was just me, Dan and the jungle again. I heard birds, but not that many; I didn't fear snakes, because there aren't any poisonous ones on the island — the occasional boa would be the only cause for anxiety, but as a woman who has worked in wildlife conservation on the islands laughingly told us, all the snakes on Dominica are in hiding. If one pokes out its head, a Dominican will likely as not dispatch it with a machete. But the odor of the jungle was all around, the smell of rot, of fermenting nature. And a couple of bats.

Also with us was the rain, Roxy's forecast notwithstanding. Thinking back over the things that had almost killed us, I realized all could be attributed to the downpour, which throughout the day made handholds more slippery, mud more muddy, mist more obscuring, chills on the high ridges more dispiriting and, when dehydration set in, thirst all the more torturous. On the other hand, the rain probably kept the sun from frying us on the spot.

We got to the place they call Breakfast River relatively without incident, and also with the growing knowledge that this hike was going to be considerably longer and more difficult than we'd thought. Behind us lay a mostly uphill stretch of well-marked path — demanding, but not more so than the Grand Fond Trail from Freshwater to Boeri Lakes yesterday. Now, we stood at the top of a steep ravine looking at a twisting trail that led down to the river, mirrored by its evil twin snaking up the other side of the ravine, and then a long line of mountainous ridges stretching off like mazes from the mind of Edgar Rice Burroughs, or, worse, William S.

Burroughs. I was seized by doubt. I said my mantra. Then I booked.

At the top of the other side of the ravine, I spotted a fresh citrus rind and felt better. Maybe this really was the trail. We slogged over protruding roots that could jab into ankles and shoes. I wore my Nikes, but Dan had boots. I was smarter. Replacing my running shoes would cost about \$50. He was looking at twice that. In truth, footwear choice didn't matter. Water from streams, rivers and the heavens had already drenched us, so our socks were wet and blisters were likely. Traction was a joke either way.

We moved on like Job's hikers. Every mountain led to another, every ridge descended only to rise. No Boiling Lake in sight, and every step we took in was one we'd have to give back. Eventually I got tired of crabbing about it and just kept moving.

When I spotted the patches of steam from across the jungle valleys — proof at last to my doubting — I shouted at Dan. By then the rain was falling hard, and the wind came like a surprise visit from an old girlfriend: cold and in your face. I couldn't believe it — Bataan death march on a tropical island, and now I was freezing to death.

Another ridge line and we were at last where the going would start to get rough. The Valley of Desolation dipped below like a Georgia O'Keeffe flower, but one full of rocks and steam. The green of the rain forest changed to mud red-brown and pumice gray. The only way down to the valley was a jagged cliff face with a path that quickly became little more than the bed of a small stream and devolved into hand-over-hand rock climbing.

I gave serious thought to a U-turn. I could easily see the way through the Valley, which at that time I didn't know was still an hour from Boiling Lake — a really nasty hour — and so it wasn't a guide that we were in need of. A guide would make no difference. The danger wasn't in getting lost; it was in breaking your neck.

We descended. The stream bed and cliff face broadened to a field of crusty lava. This was where we had been warned that a slight false step could result in cracking the surface and getting burned. I stepped lightly. Steam hissed all around. Half-hidden apertures gurgled with boiling water. The

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 126)

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BOILING LAKE

(FROM PAGE 75)

air was foul with sulfur. Most religions have some kind of metaphor for hell. I was in one.

We followed rocky river beds mostly, leaving them from time to time when the trail deviated off on a bluff or to cross a ridge. Some of the streams were cool and clear. Others were hot, chalky white, and some were blue as ink. Near the top of a particularly steep ladder of cliff steps, we paused. An invasion of dark gray clouds had come in fast from the north and the rain hit so hard and cold we dug out a um-num thermal blankets for shelter. We looked like a couple of baked potatoes with hats.

**Most religions have
a metaphor for hell.**

I was in one.

We drank nearly the last of the bottled Fanta carbonated water. We didn't have any ordinary purified water because: (a) Dan said we didn't need to get any in Roseau because Roxy's would sell us some, and (b) what did Dan know? Roxy did have the Fanta, so we had purchased a half-dozen bottles and poured their contents into a canteen. It tasted like brackish Alka-Seltzer, but it was wet and didn't contain amoebas.

In 15 minutes, we crested another slope to see another ravine of volcanic rock and debris, a Desolation Valley II, also known as the Grande Soufrière Valley. The sulfur was worse, and hot steam was closer. I could pick out a path by watching carefully — it pretty much followed the route you'd take just using common sense — and by noticing the cairn-like arrangements of rocks previous hikers had placed at points where the trail might have been obscure. That was a damn nice thing about Dominica. I was truly grateful. Maybe nobody went out of their way to cater to gringo tourists, but for the important stuff somebody cared.

I heard voices, front and back. To our rear, three hikers were coming down the trail maybe 10 minutes behind us. Up ahead, the locals were on the way back from the lake. That meant two things: The lake was very

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near, and it was possible to go home. They were singing and elated. The Rasta man was washing his hair in a hot stream, and the others were almost skipping. The woman in the group had shed her sandals and walked barefoot. "How can you do that?" I asked. She laughed and went on. Later I realized they had had a party up at Boiling Lake, and she was probably high enough to fly home.

Up the Rasta man's stream, over a steep bluff, lay a wide expanse of rock. Carved in it were the initials of many who had gone before, notches inside the barrel of the volcanic crater we had entered. The trio from behind caught up, greeted us and moved on. John, a Swiss tourist, was being guided by Jarrett, a Dominican, and his son, Julian. Jarrett, a former army man, wore his fatigue shirt and carried a machete, most likely for show. I sat on the rock and thought about how hungry I was. I was saving a Snickers, my only food for the day, until later.

I got up and followed Dan down the last segment of the path to Boiling Lake. Or what was probably Boiling Lake. The rain and cool weather had formed a cloud of mist that fit over the lake bed like a cork. All I could see was fog. I walked closer until Jarrett called out, "Careful, mon. That's very slippery." So I backed away for firmer footing. A gust blew away the mist and I finally saw what I had spent the better part of a week journeying for. Boiling Lake was a sheer rock crater, maybe 100 meters across, almost round, and the water lay 50 or so feet straight down. It was like a stone-carved hot tub. You could feel the heat as you approached the precipice. Looking down over the edge, I thought how much I'd hate to fall in. I don't know if anyone has — Jarrett didn't think so.

But it wasn't boiling.

Dan had unslung his gear and was trying to dig out four beers he'd quietly lugged in. His day was complete. Onerous hike insufficiently prepared for, potentially fatal mountain paths, little water and no food, and not only was it too cloudy for good photos, too steamed up to even see the lake, the thing wasn't even *boiling*.

We drank a beer and thought maybe next time we'd try an adventure in Cannes. Then the mist cleared again, for almost 10 seconds. When it did, right from the middle of the lake came a

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huge gurgling bubble. It broke into waves, followed by another, and another.

Boiling.

On the other side of the lake I could make out trees and a small opening leading down to a valley. Suddenly it seemed a truly weird place indeed. Boiling volcanic lake, middle of a tropical island, and there was Jarrett, bare-chested, talking about training American troops in the jungle, and Julian, pretending to lock and load an automatic pistol, and Swiss John, munching a cheese sandwich and telling about the time he'd been to Texas.

**The lake took
everything from you
just to take you in.**

We finished the beers and threw them into the lake. It didn't seem like littering. Even if it was, it seemed fair. Then we repeated every step back to Laudat, except faster, more insistently. At Breakfast River, Dan dropped onto his knees and drank from the stream. It turned out to be safe, but I wasn't sure, so I stayed thirsty. My reward was searing heat cramps in my thighs. The next ravine was mind over muscle, but after a short rest I was OK. I figured I needed potassium, and here I was on an island of bananas.

We got back to Titou Gorge in mid-afternoon, seven hours after we'd left it. French tourists had come to see the hot and cold falls. Jarrett, Julian and John arrived, and I was glad to see they looked tired, too. But I got a second wind and made a good pace back to Roxy's for the Mazda. We spent that night in Roseau at the Anchorage, a clean, breezy hotel on the ocean front, and I watched two small sailboats make harbor and tie up for the night. It was like being back in civilization, but that night, I still couldn't sleep. This place, that had been so inaccessible, so much trouble, that took everything from you just to take you in, was too much for even my dreams to shield.

Special Correspondent Rod Davis is writing a book that's due out next year from Bantam.

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