



The Seven Natural Wonders of the Caribbean

By Robert Curley, About.com

In a region where the natural beauty of tropical rainforests, pristine beaches and colorful reefs are among the main attractions, you'll find plenty of nominees that merit inclusion in any "best of" list. However, the treasures that make up my list of Seven Natural Wonders of the Caribbean are the best of the best -- those sublime spots where nature has the awesome ability to take your breath away.

The Baths, Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands

The Baths is the Caribbean snorkeler's paradise, a jumble of ancient underwater boulders that form a series of caves, grottos and pools along the coast of Virgin Gorda. Thanks to the calm and sheltered waters, even the most novice snorkeler can enjoy the beauty of the coral-kissed rock formations as they paddle from hidden pools right up onto the shore of the main beach. There's nothing more refreshing than a plunge into the sparkling sea after exploring The Bath's intricate shore caves -- it can take an hour or more of clambering and snaking through the rocks to see them all.

Bioluminescent Bay, Vieques, Puerto Rico

A kayak trip down a narrow mangrove river leads to Vieques' Bahia Fosforescente, or Bioluminescent Bay, which is both a unique natural site and a wonderful experience for visitors. The bay's shallow and bacteria-rich waters provide the ideal environment for one-celled protozoa that use bioluminescence, or light creation, as a defense mechanism. In other words, these microorganisms light up when disturbed, either by a predator or a swimming tourist. On a moonless night, a swim in the bioluminescent bay of Vieques is truly a magical experience as ripples and waves of light stream from your paddling arms and wiggling fingers.

Bonaire National Marine Park

In a region where nearly every destination has a reef system and boast of its diving opportunities, Bonaire is acknowledged as one of the true meccas for scuba buffs and snorkelers. Bonaire's National Marine Park literally surrounds the island, from the shoreline to the point where the water reaches 200 feet in depth, and is the best

protected reef system in the Caribbean. Human activities, while closely controlled, range from swimming, kayaking and windsurfing to diving and snorkeling.

El Yunque Rain Forest

The Caribbean's most famous rain forest is also its most beautiful, one of the crown jewels of the U.S. National Park Service. The park isn't huge, but its 28,000 acres includes staggering biodiversity -- home to thousands of native plants and hundreds of animal species. With 600,000 annual visitors, El Yunque can sometimes feel a bit overwhelmed, but quieter experiences can be had in the summer (when locals enjoy a dip in the cool rivers, largely away from tourists), spring, and fall. Hiking, fishing, and even camping is available to those who truly want to immerse themselves in the rainforest experience.

The Pitons, St. Lucia

One of the iconic vistas not only of St. Lucia but in the entire Caribbean, the twin volcanic peaks of the Pitons rise dramatically from the sea. The Pitons Management Area, a UNESCO World Heritage site, includes active hot springs, coral reefs, and tropical forests. Hardy visitors to St. Lucia take the challenge of hiking to the top of the 2,619-foot Gros Piton (Petit Piton, at 2,461 feet, is off limits to climbers).

Pitch Lake, Trinidad

Some call the Pitch Lake of Trinidad the ugliest tourist attraction in the Caribbean, and some visitors have likened its appearance to a giant parking lot. But this bubbling, hissing, stinky 100-acre lake of liquid asphalt is the largest of its kind in the world, and well worth a visit. Located near the town of La Brea, the Pitch Lake is 350 feet deep, and visitors can walk on parts of its crusty surface. Guides will show you how the lake is constantly moving and swallowing some items, spitting out others. The lake, which contains an estimated 6 million tons of asphalt, is replenished from pitch veins that run deep below the earth's surface.

Soufriere Hills Volcano, Montserrat

The highly active, sometimes angry Soufriere Hills volcano in Montserrat has been both a blessing and curse to local residents. A major eruption of the volcano beginning in 1995 devastated the tiny island, rendering the entire southern half of Montserrat uninhabitable, burying the capital city of Plymouth under tons of ash, and killing 18 people. But the volcano also is an irresistible lure for island visitors, who can view current eruptions and abandoned buildings from a former golf course now covered by volcanic mudflows. Tourists also can visit the Montserrat Volcano Observatory, which closely monitors activity at Soufriere Hills.