Literature
With a Splash of Lime

Plan your next vacation around one of these Caribbean literary festivals, and enrich your writing life island-style.

BY JOANNE C. HILLHOUSE
To most, the Caribbean is above all a sun-splashed getaway. But when you consider that it’s the birthplace of two Nobel Laureates in Literature (Saint Lucia’s Derek Walcott and Trinidad’s V.S. Naipaul) plus celebrated writers such as Antigua’s Jamaica Kincaid, Haiti’s Edwidge Danticat, the Dominican Republic’s Junot Diaz and Jamaica’s Marlon James, it makes sense that the literary nature of your travels there extend beyond the beach read in your bag.

Opportunities for writers and devoted readers alike to add some culture, inspiration and even education to their pleasure trips are growing, as celebrations of books and authors that take a decidedly more festive approach than your typical writing conference are on the rise. And many of them are low or no cost, which makes attending as simple as synching travel dates on your calendar.

Just as the character of each island is different, so too is the character of each festival. Here are five that are worth the trip.

1. **ANGUILLA LIT FEST**

   anguillalitfest.com

   A participating author in 2015, I can honestly say I’ve never before arrived to a lit fest via speedboat. Anguilla, a British overseas territory, is charmingly low traffic, as is its small international airport, hence the popularity of the boat charter service from neighboring St. Maarten/St. Martin. Anguilla is branded as a high-end destination, and the festival venues, including an opening reception at the Government House (with the governor herself in attendance), certainly reflect this. You’ll want to explore, and the festival schedule (two days of sessions from roughly 9 to 3, with three or four nights of evening events) is light enough to allow for some independent adventuring—even if you make it no further than the gloriously pristine beaches.

   Organizers of this literary “Jollification”—a spirit of community embraced as an important part of Anguilla’s cultural heritage—are clearly well connected; in 2015, the lineup included *O, The Oprah Magazine* Books Editor Leigh Haber and Grammy Award–winning performance poet J. Ivy. The panels struck a balance of topics for readers and writers, including an evening with self-published bestseller turned Simon & Schuster A-lister Zane, a luncheon session on memoir writing by Oprah.com pick Elizabeth Nunez, and a panel of publishing insiders. This all takes place poolside under adorned white tents at host hotel Paradise Cove. Community outreach is a big part of the offerings, with participating authors stepping out to read to children at the public library, teen students brought on-site for select workshops, and local poetry competition winners and anthology contributors invited to take the mic. The format is casual enough to allow for friendly interaction and unexpected connections, from the breakfast buffet to the on-site bookstore to the nighttime cocktails with live music and dancing.

   **NEXT DATE:** May 19–22, 2016.

   **FESTIVAL FACTS:** Accommodations packages are offered by a number of participating hotels, including host hotel Paradise Cove and sponsor hotel CuisinArt Golf Resort and Spa; check the festival website for rates and other recommendations. There is a registration fee that can be paid in advance or at the door (single-day rates available; full two-day package, including some meals and transportation, tops out at about $150). Optional “extras,” which in 2015 included lunchtime jazz and a sail away to Sandy Island, are available for an additional fee.
An open mic event  Children’s story time

Bocas will always hold a special place in my memory as the event where my book *Musical Youth* collected the second-place trophy for the teen/young adult Burt Award for Caribbean Literature in 2014. I flew in just in time to be taxied to Martin’s Bar, where it was standing room only for the launch of *Pepperpot: Best New Stories From the Caribbean*. I was immediately caught up in the event’s dizzying pace, including caravanning to a few satellite events in other parts of the city (I was lucky to catch a reading by award-winning poets Kei Miller and Lorna Goodison).

The main Bocas event is based at the National Library and adjoining historical Old Fire Station in the capital city Port of Spain. This festival was so down to earth, it could’ve been a fête—people milling about, feeling the vibes, sipping on beer, nipping on barbecue. With Bocas, there’s a sense of being in constant motion, and in the in-between—because with the all-day (and into the night) overlapping events, there’s no way you can avoid missing something. Everyone’s experience there will be different, which is part of its charm.

Bocas’ mix includes screenings of films such as *Earl Lovelace—a Writer in His Place*, outdoor performances of spoken word and calypso, children’s activities, panels and readings. Workshops cover such specifics as writing for young adults, true-life writing and speculative fiction, in hopes of fostering what festival coordinators describe as “creative collisions and cross-pollination.”

That Trinidad, one of the bigger Caribbean islands, awards several significant literary prizes there—the OCM Bocas Best Book Prize, the Hollick Arvon Caribbean Prize for emerging writers, the Henry Swanzy Award for contribution to Caribbean literature, and the Burt Award—makes it news- and noteworthy. “The prizes lend much of the dynamism and *raison d’être* to the festival,” founder Marina Salandy-Brown says.

There are also 2.0 versions that take place each July in Tobago, Trinidad’s more natural sister island, and each October on San Fernando Hill in southern Trinidad.

**NEXT DATE:** April 27–May 1, 2016.

**FESTIVAL FACTS:** All readings, panels and performances are free and open to the public; preregistration and a nominal fee of $10–15 is required for workshops. A shuttle service is offered from the Queen’s Park Savannah to and from festival events, so while the festival lists no affiliated hotel, the many accommodations within walking distance of the Savannah would be most convenient. Visit the website and join Bocas’ email list for updates.

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I attended Jamaica’s self-described “earthy, inspirational, daring and diverse” festival with a small group of writers from my home island of Antigua. We rented a guest-house, and the independent accommodations proved perfect for the festival, which unfolded like a big, relaxed, all-day picnic at the very edge of the island.
Home base for Calabash is Jake’s at Treasure Beach, its brown-sugar brown sand reminding you that, though far from the bustle of Kingston, you’re further still from Jamaica’s more popular white-sanded beach towns. Tradition trumps tourism in the most delicious of ways in the small fishing community of St. Elizabeth. As I write this my mouth is watering with memories of the Escovitch fish.

Another thing that gives Calabash such a unique vibe is the way co-founders Colin Channer and Kwame Dawes, both acclaimed Jamaican writers, worked with producer Justine Henzell to set it up. There’s a large single tent where hundreds of eyes focus on the stage, which is back-dropped by the sea. The wind is wild and spirits high. You might feel emboldened to take a turn at the open mic, or content to kick back and soak up the latest of the many international voices that have been heard there over the years—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka, Russell Banks, Zadie Smith …

Calabash, as I experienced it, is more about conversations with writers and celebration of the written word than it is about the industry. More than any of the festivals I’ve been to, Calabash has the effect of making you want to run and buy every book you’ve been teased by, so pack light.

**NEXT DATE:** June 3–5, 2016.

**FESTIVAL FACTS:** Festival events are free to the public. Treasure Beach is not a resort town, so for accommodations you’re looking at small hotels, villas and cottages with per-night rates around $100 and under—and many to choose from within walking distance. (Lodging reservationists can usually assist with transfers from the airport, a considerable distance.)

### NATURE ISLAND LITERARY FESTIVAL AND BOOK FAIR

dominicalitfest.com

Lying into the West Indies’ Dominica is a bit like landing in Eden, with lush greenery all around. You’ll take a long, winding and somewhat precipitous drive through all of that greenery and Carib territory to the main city, Roseau. If that sounds French, it’s because it is. Dominica has history as a British territory as well as a French one, so you’ll hear both English and French Creole or patois spoken there. Co-founded by renowned regional playwright Alwyn Bully, this festival is one of the most intimate you’ll find: When I attended in 2012, the whole group of attendees squeezed into a meeting room for a poetry workshop with Mervyn Morris, then gathered under the main tent on the University of the West Indies grounds for Bajan poet Adrian Green’s sharp, incisive rhythms.

With strong participation by Dominican writers (especially up-and-comers), cultural showcases and a companion craft display, this festival has heavy emphasis on celebrating local arts. Sessions such as 2015’s "What’s Fit..."
to Print: Self-Publishing and the Literary Marketplace” address issues relating to the broader writing community as well. Perhaps because Dominica is an agrarian community with a neighborly feel, there’s a genuine hominess to the Nature Island Literary Festival. The year I was there, when all was said and done, Bully invited all the writers in attendance to his home for an informal lime (a Caribbean term for a gathering or hangout).

**NEXT DATE:** Typically the first weekend in August, with the opening night forming part of the country’s Emancipation Day activities.

**FESTIVAL FACTS:** Activities are centered at the UWI Open Campus, with one or two outlying events (2015’s lineup included an open mic at Purple Turtle Beach, to which transportation was provided). Workshops (for adults and children) are free but require advance registration on the website. There, you’ll find details on other scheduled activities.

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**THE ST. MARTIN/ST. MAARTEN BOOK FAIR**

houseofnehesipublish.com/book_fair2040.html

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On an island uniquely divided into a Dutch side and a French side, this festival offers a “charismatically Caribbean” taste of both. “As a symbol of the traditional unity of the St. Martin people, the opening ceremony is alternated between both capitals of the island, Marigot in the North and Philipsburg in the South,” says Lasana Sekou of House of Nehesi Publishers, which co-founded the event in 2003.

In 2015, as I took in the nighttime opening ceremony at the Mediatheque Territoriale, on the French side, a quote from Indian writer Tishani Doshi’s speech stayed with me: “We do not write for a void. We write for an audience, and the words we use must land somewhere, and we must make them sharp and fresh so they can find new countries.” Indeed, this is one of the most multilingual festivals, with presentations captured in various tongues in keeping with the goal of being “an eventful meeting place for the national literature of St. Martin and the literary cultures of the Caribbean; networking with literary cultures from around the world.”

But English-speakers won’t feel at sea. Run by a cadre of energetic young volunteers, the event facilitates real bonding and a relaxed pace, save for the busier singular book fair day, Saturday at the University of St. Martin (in Philipsburg, on the Dutch side), which has a packed schedule of sales and signings. Speaking of which: Independent and self-published authors and publishers who are not officially invited guests are provided with a free table to exhibit their books—space is available on a first-come basis.

The final night, formalities concluded at a posh hilltop residence, after which the caravan beelined to the city’s nightclubs. The first venue featured a live soca band that managed to get popular reggae singer Bankie Banx on the mic—and everyone on their feet until closing time. Then we headed over to a packed and pumping “disco”—in name only, as the music was strictly Caribbean.

**NEXT DATE:** June 2–4, 2016.

**FESTIVAL FACTS:** All events are free to the public, except for a literary evening and dinner (price was $50 in 2015, but varies depending on the venue). Getting around involves a combination of festival-provided transportation, hotel courtesy buses and/or taxis on your own. For discounted hotel rates, visit the website or contact coordinator Shujah Reiph at consciouslyrics@yahoo.com and nehesi@sintmaarten.net.

Nearly every year the Caribbean is seeing the birth of new literary festivals (see the sidebar on Page 47 for quite a few more), not to mention retreats (from the Drawing Room Project Writers Retreat in Jamaica to the Just Write Writers Retreat in Antigua. And as visitors readily embrace how these offerings can enrich their travels, the perception of what festivals can bring to their host communities continues to grow. For all of these islands, as ideally located as they are in tropical paradise, as underfunded as the arts are, there are clear touristic and arts development goals. In a more profound sense, suffice to say they have this in common: writers and lovers of words joined together to retreat from the world for a while and nourish their collective literary soul.

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