

Eye-opening Lady of the CANYON

By Jessica Quandt

YOU COULD SAY I DECIDED TO GO CANYONING AS A LEAP OF FAITH.

Prior to my arrival in Martinique, I'd simply been told the island's inscrutably famous sport is fun but hard to describe. Everything from Google searches to informal surveys of locals turned up enthusiastic but vague adjectives. I've heard "exciting," "extreme," and "the biggest pleasure of your life," but few backing details. And even after I've emptied my pockets of valuables and plunged, fully clothed down to my shoes, into the icy water at the bottom of the *Gorge de la Falaise* canyon, I'm still not sure what "canyoning" means.

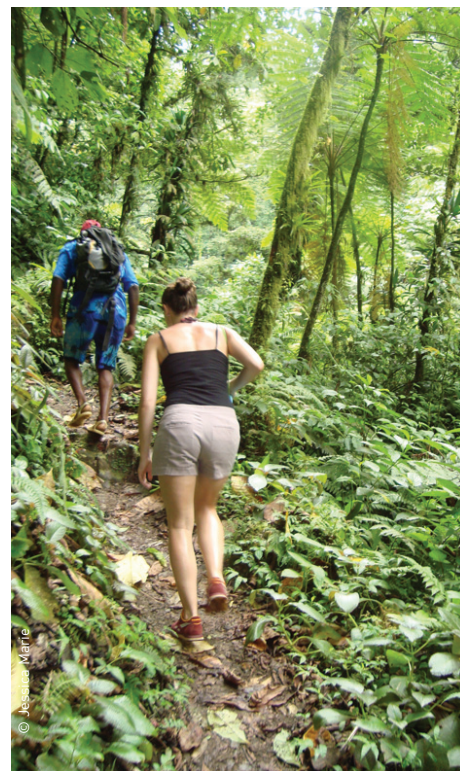
Luckily my guides, Joseph and Michael, seem to know exactly what *they're* doing. I'm shoulder-deep in the relentless shove of a river, fighting my way upstream as my feet slip on the rocky bed below. But just looking up, my job seems easy by comparison. My two guides leap from canyon wall to mossy canyon wall in staggered arcs over my head, like Spiderman bounding between buildings. I wonder how they learned their trade, whether they've studied endless Discovery specials on flying squirrels, or if the island teaches all school children parkour the way we're taught dodge ball in the States.

"Allez," they call down to me, "*keep going*," and the further I push upstream, the more my body adjusts to the frigid water. The current tugging back on me feels more like a challenge now than a hindrance, and finally I can focus on my surroundings. The "canyon" we've been

underwater-hiking through is really more of a crevasse. It's as if a mammoth bolt of lightning struck the island's Jurassic Park jungle cover, leaving a deep crack so narrow my guides can often place one foot on either wall and stand high above me, letting the water rush under them like human suspension bridges. The canyon walls are studded with boulders and painted with soft green moss, and they're alive with prehistoric-looking ferns and the whistling of birds. We hear no one else, pass no one else. The canyon's too narrow for two-way traffic, anyway.

Michael jumps down into the water, grabs my hand and pulls, helping me aquatic-climb up a steep drop in the river. The further upstream we clamber, the more I forget that we're actually heading *towards* something—suddenly it's all about this once-ineffable journey. My confidence grows as I find footholds and vines to grab onto, pulling and propelling myself along.

And then suddenly, without warning or fanfare, we hoist ourselves through a sliver of canyon opening and into a great pool. At the far edge, I see the source of the powerful current we've been struggling against: a towering waterfall, spilling white and thunderous over rocks I must crane my neck up to see. And here we are, dwarfed by the thing, ducking in and out of it and laughing, at once sure of how we got here and unable to fathom how we'd ever describe the trek. ■



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