

## Dirty Tricks: Erase Years with St. Lucia Mud

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Sometimes getting down and dirty is a good thing.

Take my birthday, for instance. Instead of advancing a year, I decided I'd rather try taking a few years off, using therapeutic mud. At least that was my goal... well, that and jumping on the opportunity to unleash my inner 5 year-old.

Sulfur Springs on St. Lucia was the much-anticipated excursion on my week-long birthday celebration on the Carnival Cruise ship Valor. Just inland from the picturesque fishing village of Soufrière (French for sulfur) on the southwestern side of the island, the thermal pools and mud baths are inside the

world only "drive-in" volcano. The road runs right into the crater of the dormant volcano, where you are immediately surrounded in steam, sulfur, and boiling mud.

The water in the center of the Qualibou caldera boils at around 340 degrees Fahrenheit, spewing sprays up through 24 steaming vents in the crusty surface. At one time, visitors were allowed to explore the grounds around the tar pits and over the thin crust of the crater's magma chamber. However, around twenty years ago a local guide fell through the crust into a pool of boiling water, getting badly burned up to his waist. A fence now prevents tourists from venturing beyond.

Viewing the exploding steam from the platform is fascinating, but the real reason to visit the park is to create a muddy mineral memory.

From the platform, a series of stairs leads down to the stream which runs from the crater, leaving mushy deposits of black volcanic mud along the banks. The stepping stones are hot and slippery from the volcanic water and mud, but after a few minutes I became acclimated to the just-less-than-blistering temperature.

An unmistakable odor wafted up from the stream, but after all the warnings I'd heard about the "rotten egg" stench, the smell was not intolerable, certainly less putrid than I had anticipated.



Standing ankle-deep in the hot stream, using your hands as natural cups is the best way to excavate the therapeutic sludge which is then slapped on all exposed skin. The mud, which is still warm at 110 degrees Fahrenheit, is just cool enough to slather on your body. The mineral content of sulfur, iron, calcium oxide, carbon, copper oxide, and magnesium is reputed to have medicinal value including therapeutic qualities for the skin. Many spas around the world use sulfur as their main ingredient in facial mud masks.

I know, I'm one tough mudder, no? The mud felt very soothing and the tiny bits of dirt acted like an exfoliant, sloughing away dry skin. The whole effect felt very rejuvenating.

After allowing myself time to luxuriate in the mineral-laden mud, I walked further downstream to where the flow eventually empties into a large rectangular tub roughly constructed to catch the therapeutic runoff. That's where I became one hot babe. Literally. "Just jump in!" people were saying as I tenuously offered one toe, only to pull it back. I plopped down on the edge and then tentatively lowered myself in, up to my waist. The water was really, really HOT. And smelly. Rising up from the brown water, the rank perfume filled my nostrils. Or maybe it was mud that had inadvertently gotten stuck there. Whatever the cause, the water was too hot to bath for very long, so I splashed my arms and rubbed my face, in futile effort to remove the mud.

Climbing out of the bath, I scurried over to the showers. Did I say "shower?" I meant "trickle." I stood for a really long time under the small but steady stream of cold water running down from a spigot. Yeesh! The more mud I washed off, the more appeared! It was no use trying to rinse it off the exposed skin because more just eased out from under my soiled swimsuit. I tried to inconspicuously remedy that, to no avail. Finally I gave up, dried off, and put on dry clothes.



I stuffed my mucky swimsuit into a plastic bag and tossed it into the nearest trash can. The dense black mud might be great for skin, but there was no way it was coming out of fabric.

Thankfully, the long, winding, one-and-a-half hour drive back to the port of Castries was broken up by a visit to a stunning scenic overlook of Soufriere and the iconic Pitons – Grande Piton and Petite Piton rising dramatically from the Caribbean, and the lesser known... Tasty Piton.

Back on board, I made a mental note that it was going to take days, or weeks, to get the mud from under my fingernails and toenails. It was all worth it though. .. my skin felt softer than it had in years.