Franklyn helps the pollination process of the dragonfruit
Photo: Cheryl Hutchinson

It’s 9 pm at Richmond Vale Academy, and a small circle of drummers sends rhythms into the darkness of the hills. The stars seem to be on steroids, but we still need flashlights for our dragon quest. Franklyn—the local hiking guide, night watchman, and nocturnal pollinator-in-chief—ambles ahead of our motley group: two young Scandinavian honeyeaters, two mature ladies from Barbados, and a burly Dane who is missing a teenage boy with unspecified problems. Franklyn leads us into rows of tall, twisting cacti whose flowers reach full bloom of *Hyalocereus costaricensis*. There are 54, significantly less than the record 1000, but enough to contribute to a crop. The succulent red globules that they’ll turn into helps make this institution the largest producer of this exotic fruit in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

The extraordinary Richmond Vale Academy is full of such surprises. The first is that it exists at all. A part of the International People to People, a global development organisation. In the early 1990s, RVA’s founders acquired 30 fertile acres in St. Vincent. Here they intended to provide vocational training for Vincentians and an experimental school for Danish youth with special needs. A series of modern, poured concrete buildings were erected on the verdant slopes to accommodate classrooms and dorms. It took nearly three decades for RVA to get going. Despite good facilities and intentions, the initial venture soon failed and the premises were abandoned until nearly 2000. One teacher stayed to develop the farm lands and take care of the buildings, a near-impossible task. New directors came in 2002 to restart the Academy, but didn’t quite have the right formula. Finally in 2006, capable new directors, Norwegian Stina Herberg and Danish Jesper Friis, arrived with a different combination of experiences to offer. They took over and began hacking back the jungle that had overrun the place. With local workers, they fixed the roofs, redid the wiring, planted an organic garden and began to attract international students. To help fund the enterprise, Stina and Jesper opened a nature and hiking centre which offers guided and hostel-style accommodations. By 2007, they were fully operational, offering programmes that blend theory and practice. The Climate Activist programme teaches sustainability in a number of areas, developing application methods at the Academy and in St. Vincent’s schools, communities and businesses. The 18 month “Shoulder to Shoulder with the Poor” programme is divided into three equal segments: development studies at RVA, field service in Belize or Ecuador and back to the Academy for an evaluation process that leads to teaching and media production. There’s also a six-month programme with the Climate Compliance Conference, a ten-year effort to protect St. Vincent against the effects of climate change.

The school practices what it preaches by producing much of its own food, harvesting rainwater, creating bio-gas in a waste digester and now installing solar panels. At some point, Stina also took in a herd of abandoned horses, soothed their wild and wounded spirits and began to offer horsemanship training as well. This does not mean riding lessons, but the Carolyn Resnick method, which is something more akin to horse whispering. It works. Totally unfettered, the horses respond to voice and hand cues and even enjoy playing ball! The side effect is just as important: the student learns almost as much about herself as about the animal’s natural behaviour.

For a visitor, the place feels like a cross between an ashram and Eden—a holistic place that centres on an awareness of our relationship to the earth, to animals and to fellow humans. The Spartan facilities are clean and comfortable, flecked with natural light and broad halls that open onto the stunning landscape. Long-term residents busy themselves with classes and a ristra of tasks that keep the place running. They cook and clean, they weed and water the organic garden, they tend the livestock and collect manure. Why visit? Unless you are enrolled, attending a yoga course, or participating in a retreat, your most likely reasons would be hiking and other nature-based activities, curiosity about sustainable living, or simply seeking peace. If you’re not overnighting, you can still tour the orchards and organic garden, savour the views, interact with the animals, or sit in on a slide lecture with the students. There’s plenty to discover, just ask.

As a destination, RVA rewards you on many levels. Start by simply arriving. Unless you are lucky enough to travel by boat, you undergo a stomach-lurching drive on narrow roads that trace the steep contours of endlessly rippling hills. By the time you leave the vehicle, you’ve already had an adventure.
The feeder road winds past the Academy's small bottling plant which produces passion fruit and lime juices from fruit grown on the premises. Along with tuition, the Hiking and Nature Centre, a big pumpkin patch, banana cultivation and donations, the juice enterprise contributes to the Academy’s meagre income. Continue up a slope where sheep graze and piglets wander freely. A coop full of laying hens perches amidst more trees at the top. Farther up, a banana grove bears bright blue bags to protect the fruit from pests. All of these are part of RVA. Pass a set of dorms and you reach the flat summit looking out over a river gorge to the volcano above and the bay beneath. By this point, the tranquillity is almost palpable. You’ve reached the main hall, where reception, meals and other gatherings take place. Situated on the north leeward coast, Richmond Vale is the perfect base for nature excursions. Many small trails wind through the area, offering walks from one to four hours long and a choice between hilly and flat land. One takes you past runs of an old sugar mill, while another takes you along a high spine of land with a fabulous view. Each has its own wonders. A unique option is for one or two of the centre’s horses to tag along, which they do quite calmly.

Hiking tours feature a guided trek to La Soufrière volcano. Unlike other tour operators, Richmond Vale’s trail takes the steep ascent from the leeward side. The benefits of this are the spectacular coastal scenery and the chance to cool off in the sea on the way back. Either way you approach it, the immense crater is unforgettable, with an active lava dome located at its centre, accessible by a rope stretching down a steep trail to the crater floor. If that’s not enough, there are two smaller craters too. Or there’s the short, independent walk to Dark View Falls. Once there, you cross a rushing river on a bamboo suspension bridge, immerse yourself (if you like) in the walled pools below the falls, then clamber up rock steps to the top. Higher still runs a more private waterfall, showering down at an odd angle. Rainforest, rainbows in the spray, great arcs of bamboo and vivid flowers add to the magical ambience.

Other hiking tours involve a bit of a drive to reach the starting points. Vermont Nature Trail is one such option, whose main draw is the rare and endangered St. Vincent parrots that live there. Water fun is available too. A half-hour boat trip takes you to Balene Bay, where no road goes. A short hike then leads to a cascade with a spacious swimming hole beneath. In dry season, RVA’s guide could take you to the hot springs at Wallilabou River if you’re fit enough for a day-long hike. And just down the hill, there’s near-deserted Richmond Beach, where summer mangles drop at your feet and fishermen lay palm frond traps for schools of tiny chi-chi fish that rush into the little river’s mouth during the moon’s last quarter. Underwater, an array of fish and corals populate a submerged promontory, whose far edge drops off abruptly into a deep, glowing blue that seems infinite.

It all could make you hungry. Communal meals are served at long tables in the dining hall, though you could make your own if you took a room in the Hiking Centre. Ingredients come largely from the garden, with occasional animal protein from the sea or from the property’s livestock.

At night, the multitude of stars might make you ponder the miracle of this incredible blue-green planet, and how lucky you are to be right here.

For further information, visit www.richmondvale.org or www.richmondvalehiking.com or Tel: (784) 492-4058