

Nature, history and tranquillity on the small island of Nevis

MELODY WREN
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

There is something very special about visiting a small island, and from the moment you cross the water in a tiny plane from Antigua, Nevis has woven its magic. The tiny island of Nevis, little sister to St. Kitts, is suited to travellers who enjoy raw nature, as well as to those who seek quiet, peace, and tranquillity, the primary reasons people return.

Nevis has a heritage trail and iconic plantation ruins, and other activities on the island are the best of a traditional British seaside experience. Offering far more than beautiful sugar-sand beaches and a large array of water activities, there are also unexpected on-trend gourmet restaurants, and a fascinating history with a strong Jewish component.

After being expelled from Brazil in the 17th century, Jews began to settle on St. Kitts and Nevis. At its height, the Jewish community constituted around 25 per cent of the total population.

The mostly Sephardi Jews brought to the island the secrets of crystallizing sugar, making Nevis the “Queen of the Caribbees”, because of the wealth brought in by the sugar trade.

History reveals itself gently in the many sugar plantations dotted throughout the 93 sq.-km. island (which has a population of 12,000), and in the 17th-century Jewish synagogue and cemetery.

The community erected a synagogue in

the city of Charlestown in Nevis around 1684 and established a cemetery located on Government Road containing graves dating from 1679 to 1768. There are 19 surviving markers in the cemetery, which bear inscriptions in Hebrew, English and Portuguese. At the end of the 18th century, most of the Jewish population left the island, leaving the cemetery abandoned. Today, it is the focus of a major archeological effort.

If you have archeological instincts, there is a lot to explore, including numerous ruins of plantations, ancient Amerindian sites, and a recently discovered slave village. On a guided tour of the slave village with replicas of houses the slaves would have lived in, I asked our guide, Patricia, about the horrible conditions her predecessors lived in.

She waved it off with a grin. “We had a chance to come to the Caribbean and we did. People do horrible things to each other all over the world, but we have to be positive and move on.”

I sensed she had said this many times over, but it appeased my churning emotions enough to be able to finish the tour.

We spent an afternoon in a 4x4 on a tour on coastal paths and off-the-beaten-track roads, with stop-offs at abandoned sugar plantations and churches. Some of the roads were steep enough that they made me gasp. As the island is divided into five parishes, all named after saints, the tour helped with a general overview of the different parishes. A great way to

get a unique fun and educational view around the island: www.funkymonkey-tours.com.

Situated in the Montpelier Estates overlooking Mount Nevis and the ocean with a spectacular view of the Nevis mountain peak, the privately owned Nevis Botanical Gardens are a must see. It takes an hour or more to fully explore the orchid terraces, lily ponds, bamboo grove, cactus garden and over 100 species of palms, all built to complement the natural features and beauty of the land. Bronze fountains and sculptures were installed, and, along with a striking, triple copper sugar cauldron fountain, they highlight the natural beauty.

A large conservatory in a style similar to the Palm House in Kew Gardens, London, was erected to house the tropical rain-forest plants and parrots. The Galleria gift shop is filled with desirable items that exuberant owner Christi Douglas sources globally. Above the shop, the Thai Oasis restaurant is a stylish stopping point for signature drinks and incredible food. www.botanicalgardennevis.com

Nevis, the Queen of the Caribbean, is small, beautiful, and blissfully serene, which is why travellers find themselves under its spell.

Where to stay: There are several choices for places to stay on the island, and repeat guests to the historical Nisbet Plantation beach resort return for many reasons – the appealing small size with 36 bright yellow cottages that are beautifully appointed in subtle tropical hues lending a feeling of simple luxury. A stunning beach and location and the calm tranquillity combined with a simple elegance make for a winning combination. Fabulous food and afternoon teas with an ocean view are delightful additions. General manager Alistair Forrest hosts cocktail gatherings every Monday evening for returning guests of which there are plenty. Guests who stay five nights or more get a free water taxi from St. Kitts. The six-minute ride makes it a seamless transition to the property.

Even if you aren't staying at this restored plantation, pop in for lunch, dinner, afternoon tea or drinks on the terrace. www.nisbetplantation.com

At Wheel World Cycle Shop, owned by Englishman Winston Croke, you can arrange bike tours around the island or a history and heritage tour. Croke can deliver bikes to boats or hotels. The full range of bikes features off-road, street, racing, tandems, with tag-alongs or child seats. He will meet you at the ferry or deliver you to your hotel. It's on Main Island



Nevis Plantation ruins

Road, Oualie Beach Bay. www.bikenevis.com. 869-469-9682

Pinney's Beach off the main road is a must for a visit to Sunshine's for the Killer Bee Cocktail. Everyone knows owner Llewelyn Caines as Sunshine, and famous celebrities seek him out. Barbra Streisand has enjoyed the meals and casual vibe of Sunshines. There's an extensive menu, but visitors go for the laid-back energy and a chance to chat to Sunshine, a charming personable character. Dustin Hoffman, Michael Douglas and Katherine Zeta-Jones also have visited in recent years.

If Nevis is for the discerning, then Bananas Bistro is for the gourmet aficionado. The evening we visited, we were led by flashlight to a walkway lined with torches leading us to a tall, stunning building high up on the Hamilton Estate, about a quarter of the way up Mount Nevis, at an elevation of approximately 900 feet. Upper Hamilton Estate, 1-869-469-1891, www.bananasrestaurantnevis.com ■

How to get to Nevis: we flew Westjet from Toronto directly into Antigua, a four-hour flight, then caught a connecting flight on Air Montserrat into Nevis. Not for the faint of heart, this tiny plane is so small, we were weighed along with our hand luggage to insure our suitability for the journey. What would happen if I weighed 300 pounds, I asked the ground stewardess? “We wouldn't take your luggage” she quipped.

Other options: Air Canada flies directly to St. Kitts from Toronto. Nisbet Plantation resort would arrange a water taxi to pick you up and deliver you to the resort in six minutes.



The Nevis Botanical Gardens MELODY WREN PHOTOS