

TRAVEL OCTOBER 21, 2015

Put Nevis on radar for old Caribbean charm, serenity

HIGHLIGHTS

A tiny island free of stoplights, casinos and fast-food chains

Monkey tours and lobster-lassoing scuba safaris

Secluded stays at old sugar plantations



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Special to the Star-Telegram

Mention you're going to Nevis and you may be met by a blank stare and the question, "Where is Nevis?"

When I describe it as a small island in the Caribbean next to St. Kitts, there are sometimes nods of recognition from those who recall St. Kitts from a cruise ship itinerary, but to many, the location of Nevis (pronounced KNEE-vis) remains as nebulous as the clouds that often cover its 3,200-foot volcanic peak.

A 2-mile-wide channel called The Narrows separates the 36-square-mile island from its larger sister island. Most visitors fly into St. Kitts, then catch the ferry or arrange a private water taxi to reach Nevis. Others fly directly into the Nevis airport via private jet or one of several small airlines that fly in daily from Puerto Rico and other nearby islands.

If you're seeking a Caribbean getaway without stoplights, casinos, American chain restaurants and cruise ship visitors, this is the one you've been dreaming of but didn't know existed.

2 Miles between Nevis and its sister island. Visitors can take a ferry or water taxi across "The Narrows" from St. Kitts to the smaller island.

The variety of accommodations available on this tiny island is surprising: A traveling companion and I experienced a sampling this summer during a week of exploring and staying at three resorts with contrasting vibes.

Beach seclusion

Opened in February, the island's newest villa resort, Paradise Beach Nevis, caters to families and includes seven three- and four-bedroom thatched-roof villas with a Thai-influenced design. Because our arrival was during the slower summer season, we were upgraded to a 3,400-square-foot, four-bedroom villa with an outdoor dining area and private plunge pool — all just steps from the beach.

Entry is through a sliding-glass wall that opens to reveal an expansive multiuse space where guests can relax, dine and prepare meals in the fully equipped kitchen. There is no on-site restaurant, but our butler stocked the villa with items we'd requested before our arrival, and was on call throughout our stay.

On our first evening, we relaxed with cocktails and snacks at the beach bar before returning to the villa, where private chefs were preparing our evening meal.

The concierge also makes restaurant reservations or arranges for meal delivery, and it is easy enough to stroll down the beach to reach several casual restaurants near the Four Seasons, our second stop.

Lap of luxury

Nevis' off-the-beaten-path reputation got a boost in 1991 when Four Seasons Nevis, the largest and only branded hotel chain on the island, opened with 196 rooms.

Hurricane damage forced it to close for over two years, but the Four Seasons resort reopened in December 2010 after undergoing \$120 million in reconstruction and upgrades that include a new beachside restaurant featuring 101 rums, four private beach cabanas with butler service and the addition of a third infinity-edge pool.

FOUR SEASONS NEVIS' CHAMPIONSHIP GOLF COURSE HAS OBVIOUS APPEAL, BUT GUESTS ALSO COME HERE TO VIEW ITS GREEN VERVET MONKEYS, WHICH OUTNUMBER THE ISLAND'S HUMAN POPULATION OF 12,000.

While the resort has always attracted honeymooners and couples celebrating special occasions, families love the kids' club and sea turtle education program.

Forty-six private residence villas are also available for rent in gorgeous neighborhood settings surrounding the golf course.

Golf and monkeys

The resort's 18-hole championship golf course, designed by Robert Trent Jones II, is a major draw that winds its way around the base of Mount Nevis. Its appeal to golfers is obvious, but guests also come to view the population of green vervet monkeys, first brought to St. Kitts and Nevis as pets by the French and British on slave ships and now outnumbering Nevis' human population of 12,000.

Nightly golf cart tours leave from the pro shop at dusk, with monkey sightings nearly guaranteed. While resort guests can take the tour free of charge, vacationers staying elsewhere on the island can book a two-seater golf cart for a monkey tour for \$30.

Early risers can catch them, too, on morning walks. Climb to the course's highest point, hole 15, for postcard-worthy views of the sea.

Sea-to-table fare

The highlight of my stay at the Four Seasons was taking part in its Dive and Dine experience, which gives certified divers the opportunity to lasso their own lobsters on a nearby reef, accompanied by the Four Seasons executive chef and dive staff with an operation called Scuba Safaris.

FOUR SEASONS' SCUBA SAFARIS ALLOW GUESTS TO CATCH THEIR OWN DINNER — WITH HELP, IF NECESSARY.

If yours wriggles away like mine did, the guides assist with the catch, making sure everyone returns with fresh-from-the-sea crustaceans, ready to be grilled by the chef near our private beach cabanas.

In addition to this culinary treat, our gourmet lunch included other unique sea-to-table delights — parrotfish ceviche marinated with citrus juices and filleted lionfish baked in foil packets.

For more information about Scuba Safaris, visit www.divenevis.com.

Island explorations

The best way to see the island is by car. Fortunately, it's difficult to get lost; just stay on the Main Road (yes, that's its name). It only takes an hour to drive the 21 miles without stops, but plan on a full day and some sightseeing.

You can also leave the driving to one of Nevis' many knowledgeable taxi drivers, who are adept tour guides and will provide a narrative of the island's history along the way.

Before heading up the mountain, we started with Charlestown, Nevis' capital and the birthplace of Alexander Hamilton, who helped draft the U.S. Constitution and was the first secretary of the Treasury.

Hamilton was born on Nevis in 1757 and lived on the island until age 9. Hamilton House, a stone building dating to 1680, houses the Museum of Nevis History and an exhibit about Hamilton. The building's second floor is the meeting room for the Nevis House of Assembly.

Situated on the outskirts of town is the former Bath Hotel, opened in 1778 as the Caribbean's first tourist hotel. Although Nevis has escaped mass tourism, it has long attracted the rich and famous. Its volcanic hot springs drew visitors from throughout the West Indies and Europe who were seeking relief from their ailments in the mineral-rich waters.

The Bath Hotel has counted poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, British Navy Capt. Horatio Nelson and Prince William, heir to the British throne, among its famous guests. Today, the hotel houses government offices, but visitors and locals alike still come to soak in the waters.

Plantation tours

In the early 17th century, Nevis earned its moniker "Queen of the Caribbees," when more than 100 sugar mill plantations were in operation, profiting England more than any other Caribbean holding. Three have been converted to boutique inns away from the beach, nestled in the hillside, with mountain views.

We toured the Golden Rock Plantation and savored one of its famous piled-high lobster salad sandwiches on freshly baked bread. A newly constructed outdoor dining terrace, expanded restaurant and other renovations had been completed since my last visit in 2009, enhancing its charm and natural botanical surroundings.

After lunch, we got a peek at its two-level sugar mill suite, often booked by honeymooners, then walked off our mango ice cream dessert with an easy rain-forest stroll on the property.

PRINCESS DIANA AND HER BOYS STAYED AT MONTPELIER PLANTATION FOLLOWING HER SEPARATION FROM PRINCE CHARLES.

Our next stop was the Montpelier Plantation, where a large weeping fig tree at the entrance nearly obscures the front of the Great House. Today, Montpelier's sugar mill has been converted into a special-occasion restaurant for private candlelit dinners, and the property embraces its history as an estate for secluded getaways.

Montpelier lays claim to hosting the 1787 wedding of Horatio Nelson to Fanny Nisbet, the widow of Nisbet Plantation's owner and the niece of the president of Nevis, John Herbert. And Princess Diana and her boys stayed here following her separation from Prince Charles.

As we turned into the driveway of our final plantation inn, The Hermitage, I was struck by memories of eating soursop ice cream on the veranda of the Great House. Offering one of the island's most idyllic settings, it is surrounded by colorful gingerbread cottages and perched on a hillside with Nevis Peak looming large in the background.

Country charm is strong, with four-poster beds and antique furnishings, but even here, there is free Wi-Fi.

On Wednesday nights, The Hermitage draws guests from throughout the island with a West Indian buffet featuring roast pig.

Abundant dining

Unlike the neighboring island of St. Kitts, Nevis has no fast-food restaurants — no KFC, Subway or Burger King — but dining options abound, starting with the budget eats found at roadside takeaways.

Bananas, a casual beachfront eatery, is an island favorite, serving up traditional stews called goat water and conch water. Coconut Grove is another. Its menu has more of a gourmet flair and boasts the island's only wine cellar.

Nearly everyone who visits Nevis stops in at Sunshine's Beach Bar & Grill on Pinney's Beach, near the Four Seasons resort, for lunch or dinner, or just to sample its signature rum punch, the Killer Bee, and pose for photos with Sunshine, its one-name proprietor and unofficial island ambassador.

Photos covering the walls are evidence that the island has not gone unnoticed by the rich and famous, including celebrities like Oprah and Beyonce, sports stars, and political figures — topped by former U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush.

North to Nisbet

We ended our week at Nisbet Plantation on Nevis' north coast, located on the site of a sugar plantation that dates to 1778 and was transformed into a hotel in 1949. Its beachfront setting is unique among the island's plantation inns.

Thirteen cottages and six suites accommodating 36 guests are spread throughout the 30-acre property, none more than a minute's walk to the beach's white sand. Guests find vases of fresh flowers in their screened porches along with the makings of a popular island drink called "Ting with a Sting" — a bottle of the grapefruit-flavored soft drink and a small bottle of CSR, a cane sugar rum produced on St. Kitts.

Rooms are equipped with comfy king-size beds and stocked mini-bars, and relaxation is the byword here, drawing honeymooners and couples seeking laid-back vacations.

A palm-lined path known as the Avenue of Palms stretches from the Great House to the shore, where breakfast and lunch are served in two casual open-air restaurants. Don't miss ordering the heart-shaped banana, mango or coconut pancakes at breakfast, then return for the daily Nevisian lunch special.

THE VIEW FROM NISBET PLANTATION'S BEACH INCLUDES THE SEA ON ONE SIDE AND NEVIS PEAK ON THE OTHER.

Tea is served on the Great House terrace in the afternoon, and guests congregate again in the bar of the Great House for drinks, conversation and music by local entertainers before being seated for three-course gourmet dinners.

Thursday night's beach barbecue, which wraps up with dancing to a local steel-pan band, is open to anyone on the island with a reservation.

Hammock time among the palm trees of Nisbet's beach became a top priority on our last afternoon. My views included the sea on one side and Nevis Peak on the other. I thought about what most attracts visitors to this small island in the West Indies, wondering whether it was the exotic beauty that nature has bestowed on it or the welcoming spirit of those who inhabit it. Or perhaps both?

Later, five words spotted on a bumper sticker plastered on a door seemed to sum it up best: "Nobody's a stranger on Nevis."

IF YOU GO

Nevis resort choices fit multiple lifestyles, budgets or desired surroundings.

Beachfront resorts

- Four Seasons Resort Nevis. Rates start at \$375 mountain view, \$450 oceanfront, through Dec. 19. Suites and private residence rentals also available. Book 60 days in advance for 30 percent discount. 800-819-5053; www.fourseasons.com/nevis.
- Nisbet Plantation Beach Resort. Rates with full breakfast, afternoon tea and three-course gourmet dinner start at \$415, through Oct. 31; \$473, Nov. 1-Dec. 19. 800-724-2088; <http://nisbetplantation.com>.
- Paradise Beach Nevis. Villa rates start at \$1,050, Oct. 31-Dec. 18. Book five nights in a three- or four-bedroom villa and receive two nights free. 869-469-7900; www.paradisebeachnevis.com.

Hillside plantation inns

- Golden Rock Inn Nevis. Rates with breakfast start at \$180 for Garden room, \$280 for Sugar Mill, through Dec. 14. 869-469-3346; <http://goldenrocknevis.com>.
- The Hermitage Plantation Inn. Open year-round. Rates with breakfast start at \$150 through Dec. 14. 869-469-3477; www.hermitagenevis.com.
- Montpelier Plantation & Beach. Rates with breakfast start at \$225 through Dec. 19. 869-469-3462; www.montpeliernevis.com.

Getting there

- American Airlines offers daily flights from Dallas-Fort Worth to St. Kitts, with connections in Miami or Charlotte. Transfer to Nevis via ferry or private water taxi. Or fly American