

# GRIFCO

TRAVEL PUBLIC RELATIONS

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## Life is sweet

The eastern Caribbean island of St Kitts offers much more than rest, relaxation and rum punch. Its fascinating history and geography will reward the adventurous traveller too

**S**t Kitts, part of the twin-island federation of St Kitts and Nevis in the northern Leeward Islands, has a rich and fascinating history. All the Caribbean islands have affectionate nicknames, and this beautiful, verdant place has been dubbed Sugar City.

Our guide, Dico, described it as a land of firsts: also called the Mother Colony, it had the dubious honour of being at the centre of the trade in slaves.

St Kitts' tourism industry is still young: until recently the island was generally agrarian and during the 17th and 18th centuries the economy depended on sugar and tobacco. When those industries ceased to be profitable and the government closed them down in 2005, a concerted effort was made to boost the existing tourism offering.

When I visited, the island was just a few weeks into a new government, reeling somewhat after the first regime change in decades. As we drove around the various constituencies, we saw political slogans painted on walls and lampposts. For many younger voters, it's their first new prime minister. Everyone I spoke to was friendly and hopeful about the future.

I experienced a few firsts of my own on the island. Brimstone Hill is a fortress designed by the British to repel the French. It was built by slaves over a century beginning in 1690, and it's the only man-made UNESCO World Heritage site in the Eastern Caribbean, a stunningly impressive sight.

The road that leads to the fort, built into the side of the mountain, is winding and

vertiginous. But it is infinitely preferable to the back-breaking climb the slaves would have faced while building it. Even the French soldiers who surprised the British in 1732, despite the fortress' far-reaching 360 degree sea views, must have had quite a time reaching it. Possibly the large amounts of rum many routinely consumed, and poor standards of health among the soldiers, meant the British were caught snoozing.

When we neared the summit of the hill, the site was crowded, and that's where I joined my first open-air Baptist service. Members of a local church, Calvary Baptist Tabernacle, were worshipping in the open air and the jubilant gospel music and friendly welcome made a strange contrast with the stern, military edifice hewn from black volcanic rock.

Our driver pointed out historical sites as we travelled to the rainforest. St Kitts is only 32 miles long, so we passed most of them, including petroglyphs carved by the island's native Carib Indians. Sadly, because of its strategic importance to colonists, much of the island's history is violent: names including Bloody Bay, Bloody Point and Bloody River commemorate the massacre of the Carib Indians in 1636.

Later we travelled to Kittitian Hill, a new development partly financed by citizenship investment, which is set to bring \$400m into the island by the time it is complete. Built on the beautiful green slopes of Mount Liamuiga, a dormant volcano that dominates the northern part of the island, it affords stunning views of St Kitts and neighbouring islands Statia and Saba. In a nod to the island's agrarian heritage

and its rich and fertile soil, Belle Mont Farm's restaurant opened in July 2014, harnessing the farm to plate ideology. They grow most of the food used in the >

restaurant on site, and the rest is sourced from within St Kitts and Nevis.

The attention to detail in the accommodation is reflected in the price - around £1,500 a night. But that includes fresh fruit delivered in tiny bespoke crates, an iPad in every room, and the most beautiful open air bathrooms I have ever seen. Room service consists of a tiny food van which transports a chef to your guest house or villa, where they'll cook you something fresh and seasonal.

Rainforest covers two thirds of St Kitts and, unusually, that area is increasing. The forest provides herbs and plants for cooking and medicinal purposes, wood for small artefacts and fishing spears. Our guide, O'Neil Mulraine (book a tour by emailing [oneilmulraine@hotmail.com](mailto:oneilmulraine@hotmail.com)) was supremely knowledgeable. He pointed out hummingbirds, brightly tiger-striped butterflies but not, notably, the green vervet monkeys that rule the island, a legacy of the French, who kept them as pets. While very cute, they are pests that steal fruit and vegetables, so perhaps they were off marauding.

Maurice Widdowson, originally from Britain, owns historic Romney Manor. It



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was once home to Sam Jefferson II, an ancestor of Thomas Jefferson, third President of the USA. It became the first estate on St Kitts to emancipate its slaves in 1836 thanks to another owner, the Earl of Romney.

Now it is a peaceful place, which specialises in colourful batik and history. Maurice recently unearthed an old distillery, and hopes to excavate more of the property. There you can see the lead pipes through which rum flowed, the cause of 'rum sickness' in the European settlers. Ironically, the slaves, who drank the 'mash', which didn't pass through pipes, were unscathed.

It's a popular place among visitors from the West Indian diaspora, says Maurice, who plans to build a memorial garden to the last slaves that worked here. It is striking, he says, that the slaves, while so close to the heaven of the rainforest, were working among the hellish, searing flames and cramped tunnels of the distillery.

But nowadays St Kitts is a true paradise, and for many types of tourist too: foodies; adventurers; walkers; horticulturalists...and above all to historians, who will find the island's memories all around them. ■

British Airways flies from Gatwick to St Kitts via Antigua on Wednesdays and Saturdays for an average of £650-£750.



Rainforest guide  
O'Neil Mulrain



## Did you know?

Amazing Grace, the well-known hymn about sin and redemption, was written on St Kitts by slave trader John Newton.

St Kitts and Nevis had a large Sephardic Jewish population after the expulsion from Brazil, at one time numbering 25 per cent of the population. A synagogue was erected on Nevis in the 17th century.

The national bird is a brown pelican, the national flower is a flamboyant, or royal poinsettia.

A sedate, gentle way to tour the island and get to know its history is on the Scenic Railway, where you can try traditional sugar cakes and sip a rum punch while being serenaded by a local choir. You'll pass a number of schools, whose excited children wave at the train.



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## Accommodation

### Timothy Beach

**Best for:** families (self-catering facilities available), explorers, those who want to stay on the Caribbean side of the island. Charming staff and an easy-going ambience. [www.timothybeach.com](http://www.timothybeach.com)

### Ottley's Plantation Inn

**Best for:** those searching for peace and quiet, easy access to rainforest trails, good food and a spa. Famous for its Sunday lunch and well-manicured gardens, it also has tennis and croquet facilities. [www.ottleys.com](http://www.ottleys.com)

### Ocean Terrace Inn

**Best for:** people who want to be in the middle of the action with spectacular views, people-watchers. This medium-sized boutique hotel near the capital of Basseterre recently reopened after a total refurbishment. [www.oceanterraceinn.com](http://www.oceanterraceinn.com)

## Food

### Carambola

Upscale beach club adjacent to golden sand with plenty of lounging opportunities (on giant sun beds), wonderful bespoke cocktails and great fusion food. [www.facebook.com/carambolabeachclub](http://www.facebook.com/carambolabeachclub)

### Marshalls

A very special local institution, this has been open for 17 years and the owner, Verral Marshall, is still very much in charge. It's located in the Frigate Bay area, has its own swimming pool inside the restaurant, and is the St Kitts destination for celebrations. [marshallsdining.com](http://marshallsdining.com)

### Fisherman's Wharf

Part of Ocean Terrace Inn in Basseterre, this place offers outside seating on an upper and lower deck, views of the cruise ships when docked, and really fabulous local food, including



Ottley's Plantation Inn

conch chowder and delicious mahi mahi. [fishermanswharfst Kitts.com](http://fishermanswharfst Kitts.com)

### El Fredo's

A charming, family-owned restaurant with lip-smacking Caribbean specials from an ever-changing menu. Fantastic lobster and shrimp combo and conch, with lovely local juices. [www.facebook.com/ElFredosRestaurantandBar](http://www.facebook.com/ElFredosRestaurantandBar)

## Drink

### Salt Plage

Christophe Harbour is another multi-million dollar development

and Salt Plage caters for the yachting set, with tie-ups on the pier for those arriving by sea. The cocktails are delicious and the people-watching opportunities unparalleled. [www.christopheharbour.com/explore/salt-plage](http://www.christopheharbour.com/explore/salt-plage)

### Reggae Beach

This friendly, informal beach bar on Cockleshell Bay, where a range of watersports are available, serves rum punch and Caribbean lunches to hungry punters. There are also outdoor showers and a gift shop. [www.reggaebeachbar.com](http://www.reggaebeachbar.com)