

Publication: Amuse [Online](#) *Chris Hatherill's attendance on group press trip

Date: 14th August 2015

UMV: N/A

PR Value: N/A

Amuse

Ecodrool: Welcome to the Caribbean's First Guilt-Free Luxury Resort

Kittitian Hill on St Kitts puts Mother Nature first - and is home to the world's first edible golf course



St Kitts is blessed with lush virgin rainforest, which still covers a full quarter of the landmass. Small subsistence farms dot the lowlands, and there's plenty of wild space. In the hills above the capital Basseterre, there's talk of creating a new national park, and in the northwest we're staying at [Kittitian Hill](#) - a new model for big developments, both from an environmental and human angle.

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Mount Liamuiga rises above the tiny Caribbean island. Behind us the rainforest flanks the steep slopes of a slumbering stratovolcano, while below lies a series of grassy fields, tree-lined valleys and traditional island-style houses under construction. The quiet buzz of saws and distant drumming of hammers is punctuated by the sound of birds chirping, green Vervet monkeys leaping from tree to tree and tropical breezes rustling through the mangos.

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“Lazing the afternoon away in an outdoor bathtub, fed by rainwater, it’s easy to imagine we’re in some timeless Caribbean idyll, but in the fields below a very modern revolution is underway.”

Only a decade ago, most of this land—and a big chunk of the 65-square-mile island—was given over to sugar cane. A vast mono-cultural legacy of the region’s slavery-driven past. The British, French, Dutch and other colonial powers brought sugar to these shores to grow rich as it flourished under the tropical sun, before being laboriously felled then refined by African slaves and getting shipped off to North America and Europe. When slavery was abolished the sugar remained, and mechanisation brought a little refinement to the job of refining it. But in 2005, with sugar prices collapsing, the government of St Kitts and Nevis shut down the nationalised sugar industry—bringing an end to a longstanding way of life based on historical exploitation and industrial agriculture.

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So far, the tiny twin-island nation (the smallest in the Americas) has followed the usual Caribbean strategy of offshore banking and big hotels, but some intriguing ecological opportunities are emerging. "The business model in the hotel sector carried on pretty much where the plantations stopped," says Kittitian Hill's founder, Trinidad-born entrepreneur Val Kempadoo. "Travelling through the region I became more acutely aware of how important the tourism sector is for the Caribbean, especially on the smaller islands. But the current tourism model, with some exceptions, is really quite an extractive one—it doesn't actively contribute to the sustainability of the region, culturally, socially or economically."



Alongside his co-owner, social media mogul Patrick Liotard-Vogt, Kempadoo hopes to re-write the standard equation of high-end travel. A luxury hotel and residence development spread across 400 acres of rolling hills between the rainforest and the lowlands, Kittitian Hill is home to a collection of farmhouses, guesthouses and villas called Belle Mont Farm, and a golf course dubbed Irie Fields (perhaps the best name for a golf course ever). A forthcoming hotel and retail space called the Village Inn, which will feature more affordable rooms, film editing suites, a culture festival and other creative facilities to attract a younger crowd, will follow.

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There is a strange paradox of sustainability and luxury here. Guests sip cocktails on sun loungers in a trickling infinity pool, are chauffeured everywhere in golf carts, watch Netflix on giant screens and dine on food prepared by an international chef. But the water supply is sustainable, the golf carts are topped with solar panels and the chow is all grown, raised or caught locally. Brand new and partially under construction, it still feels a bit Disneyland in places—but scores serious points for sustainability. Asking tough questions about how such a big project can be considered green, it becomes clear that the Kittitian Hill vision is centred around the people who live there.



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"Unless we develop a stronger sense of who we are as Caribbean people we really don't know where we're going," explains Kempadoo. "We're probably one of the youngest societies in the world and probably have one of the most disturbed pasts. Sustainability starts with people—it doesn't start with the environment. The environment is actually a net product of people getting to a certain level of consciousness. In Haiti, for instance, you could plant trees until you're blue in the face—but unless we resolve a number of the social and economic issues, there'll be no trees."

To foster this mix of cultural and environmental sustainability on St Kitts, Kittitian Hill is doing some impressive things differently. For a start, all the construction work was farmed out to local contractors instead of flying in cheap labour from abroad. Stones were sourced on-site to clad the main buildings, with local people trained in woodworking and stonecutting—some of whom have now gone on to start their own businesses. No large trees were cleared for the villas and the golf course (normally the worst part of a big resort in terms of the environment) is entirely organic and tended by sheep. There are plans to switch fully to solar, wind and biomass power within five years, and to fuel the larger resort vehicles by creating a biofuel project nearby. Finally, and perhaps key to the whole development, the organic farm defines and limits the menu, forcing chefs and guests alike to move with the seasons and the local supply chain.



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"Everything you eat here is grown locally," explains Yahsonn Tafari, a dreadlocked (and, impressively, dread-bearded) former teacher who's now in charge of the farm and foraging. "If it's not from our grounds it's gathered from farms around St Kitts and Nevis. That's one of the things we try to do: put the money directly in the hands of farmers and cut out the middlemen. Part of my job is to visit the farms, develop a relationship. Whatever I bring in the chef has to find something to do with it, so if no tomato is available you won't get any tomato in your salad. It's as simple of that."

"The organic farm defines and limits the menu, forcing chefs and guests alike to move with the seasons and the local supply chain."

One evening, over an outdoor meal at a long wooden table, Kempadoo—an amateur botanist, lifelong vegetarian and, since age 12, organic farmer—and I sit down with other guests to sample the farm-to-table food journey, which in this case amounts to all of about six feet. Surrounded by raised beds of herbs and vegetables, we graze our way through a dinner that starts with crunchy raw organic veg on wooden boards, before moving on to fresh fish, local fruits, lamb and re-imagined Caribbean stews. It's already Instagram heaven, and a partnership with New York's ultra-hyped Blue Hill Farm restaurant group should put the soon-to-be destination restaurant firmly on the food traveller's map. But for Kempadoo, it's about more than giving people pretty things to eat.



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"I intend to change the food supply on St Kitts," Kempadoo says. "It's now 90% imported and 10% ground here, and I don't see any reason we can't invert that—I don't see why we can't wean ourselves off of imported food."

Kempadoo is fond of describing the development as "a purpose with a hotel wrapped around it" and it would be easy to dismiss as clever marketing if it wasn't for the fact that every aspect of Kittitian Hill seems to be an experiment in delivering the traditional luxury tickboxes in a new way. Leave the manicured walkways and wander down the dusty roads past the grassy fairways and greens—where fallen mangos present extra obstacles for golfers—and you pass a few ramshackle huts before coming to the nursery. Here, under the giant trees brimming with fruit, local staff tend to row after row of trees, bushes, flowers and vines. Sitting down with bespectacled nursery guru Winston Lake, he lists just some of what grows in a slow, hypnotic draw: "...banana, pineapple, sapotes, one hundred species of mango, Suriname cherry, matamba, rambutan, Malacca apple, raspberries, passion fruit, atemoya, ackee, lychees, ten varieties of guava..."

"How do you justify a 200-acre golf course that will be enjoyed by only a few dozen people a day at the most."

The fruit in particular is a key way around what even Kempadoo admits is an ethical minefield: how do you justify a 200-acre golf course that will be enjoyed by only a few dozen people a day at the most? The organic course is already entirely pesticide and herbicide free, nourished by wandering sheep and dotted with sunken tubes designed to channel rainwater back into the local aquifer. But by reclaiming 65 of those acres for fruit and vegetable farming, Irie Fields will help turn the development into a net producer of food—or, as the marketing people have cleverly coined it, the world's first edible golf course.

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"Golf courses have been described as 18-hole toxic monocultures and I agree," says Kempadoo. "There are very few other organic golf courses in the world—there's one in Martha's Vineyard and one in Evian in France. There's a re-education process that needs to take place. We believe our target market is a very narrow segment of people who appreciate good food, authentic experiences and genuinely want to contribute, even while they're on holiday, to making a difference."

Belle Mont Farm at Kittitian Hill's Special Signature Package starts from £1,020 and includes two complimentary nights (minimum stay four nights), all meals from the farm (including alcohol), unlimited golf and caddie, daily \$200 spa credit, exclusive airport Yu lounge access and airport transfers.

Get there greener. Sail to St Kitts instead of flying, and clear in at Basseterre. From there, sail to Dieppe Bay (17°42'N 62°80'W) for the short trip up to Kittitian Hill.