

St Kitts's five-star farm

A new resort hopes to offer an alternative to bland Caribbean hotels, becoming a cultural hub for the local community with a golf course that doubles as an organic farm



One of the larger houses for guests at BelleMont Farm

Beneath the northwest flank of Mount Liamuiga — the thickly forested 1,156m-volcanic peak that dominates St Kitts — there is a small coastal settlement called Saint Paul Capisterre, known locally as St Paul's. Atlantic spume gathers in white ruffles along a beach of black volcanic sand, and on the outskirts of the village, an Anglican church stands on a bluff, its open doors framing a swatch of turquoise sea. The faint smudge of Saint Barthélemy is visible in the distance, and a cruise ship, which slips between the tiny islands of Saba and Sint Eustatius.

I'm sitting on a back pew when an offshore wind catches at a prayer book. Curiously, the salted breeze also carries the smell of burnt caramel – the smallholders are burning some of the sugarcane stubble. For much of the past three centuries, sugar was the island's main industry. At its height, there were 156 plantations and sugar covered much of Liamuiga's fertile slopes but, unable to compete with cheaper sugar from bigger farms elsewhere, the industry declined and the final crop was harvested in 2005. All that is left of the sugar monoculture is a few fields, the narrow gauge rails used for transporting sugarcarts, and ruined mills built from the island's dark grey volcanic stone.

Today, St Kitts – like its sister island, Nevis, from which it is separated by a two-mile stretch of water – is hoping the gap left by sugar will be filled by tourism. The sector now accounts for 24.5 per cent of GDP and should get a significant boost thanks to Kittitian Hill, a \$400m resort now taking shape near St Paul's.

Occupying a 400-acre site, it will ultimately have 476 guest cottages, villas and apartments (many of them with private plunge pools), an 18-hole Ian Woosnam-designed championship golf course, a spa and several restaurants. Some \$355m of the cost is being funded by real estate sales – the cottages and apartments will be privately owned but centrally rented out when the owners aren't there. Indeed it may be that some owners never find time to visit, having been motivated less by the views and golf course than the fact that anyone investing more than \$400,000 can apply for citizenship in a country with neither income, capital gains nor inheritance tax and no requirement to spend time on the island.

On paper, I'm suspicious: the masterplan reads like a roll-call of tick-the-box facilities for yet another big, bland and corporate Caribbean resort. But Valmiki Kempadoo, 52, the Trinidadian developer behind Kittitian Hill, insists he is trying to achieve the opposite. "Tourism in the Caribbean is traditionally very corrosive," he says. "No deep thinking goes into it, which results in a quick buck but also an unsustainable industry with no connection to Caribbean culture. My broader philosophy with Kittitian Hill is to try and address the issues I think these conventional models have got wrong."




He has come to tourism by roundabout means. Brought up in farming communities across the Caribbean (his father consulted on rural development for the UN), he worked with university researchers on renewable energy technologies, before being imprisoned briefly for political activism in 1981 in Guyana. Back on Trinidad, he worked as a greenhouse nursery manager, eventually buying the company, and co-founded a TV station. Previous property development has ranged from affordable housing on Trinidad to Warner Park, St Kitts' cricket stadium. The goal of Kittitian Hill, he says, is to create a sustainable business that supports the local community. So building and hospitality staff will be locally employed, energy will come from renewable sources and organic food will be grown throughout the property, making it a net food producer. The resort will also host regular film, music, art and literary festivals, in a bid to become a cultural hub for the area.

Belle Mont Farm, the resort's first hotel, is already open, though so far with only 27 of the 84 cottages and four larger houses where guests will stay. Visitors can already use the spa and several restaurants — including Arthur's, a 10-minute drive away by the seaside in St Paul's — and the hotel will be complete by the end of the year. "The Village" comes on line at the end of 2016: a 100-room hotel alongside a farmers' market, cinema and a West Indian library and archive featuring a collection of art, music, photographs and video. The final part of the project, 64 three and four-bedroom villas known as Yaya Groves, should be finished by the end of 2018.

The design follows a relatively predictable colonial aesthetic. Belle Mont's cottages, in clapperboard with cedar-shingle roofs, are derived from traditional Kittitian chattel houses, while the Great House, containing a restaurant, bar and public areas, is designed in locally quarried stone after old sugar mills and the nearby 17th-century fortress at Brimstone Hill, albeit spliced with a soupçon of drama by way of the spectacular main infinity pool.

None of this is to say Kittitian Hill isn't pretty; it is, because the low-lying buildings are entirely appropriate to their context, nestled into the slope's contours. This is its brilliance — the feeling the development has been here for years when it isn't even finished. No tree wider than the spread of two hands was cut down to make way for building. This approach to conservation, augmented by an early commitment to planting (some 17,000 trees since 2011), is why Belle Mont's outdoor bathrooms are naturally screened by vegetation (some will need another year of growth to assure total privacy). It is also why the golf course is genuinely attractive to look at.

“ The driving range is grazed by a flock of 900 sheep, mango trees cast shade over the fairways ”

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Metre-high grasses, including sugarcane, form swathes of rough; natural ravines haven't been remodelled by diggers; the driving range and fairways are grazed by a flock of 900 sheep. "I wanted to bridge the gap between luxury and sustainability," says Kempadoo: "The 800lb gorilla-in-the-room was how to do this while tying up 200 acres for a par-71, 18-hole golf course, which is a notoriously non-productive use of land."

The solution was to make it an "edible" course, with 64 acres set aside for organic agriculture. The mango trees that cast their shade over fairways compound the difficulties of a course that is apparently fast and challenging to play ("I've not come looking for Augusta; but if they hadn't done a golf course, I wouldn't have booked, either," one American guest tells me).

In the three-acre vegetable garden, I chat to one of the farmers and find him frustrated by the tomatoes. They haven't ripened as he'd hoped in time for the weekly dinner for guests held at "the Farm", a long table lit by lanterns set among the furrows, with food served on mismatched vintage plates.

Last time I was in the West Indies, I stayed on St Barts and found tomatoes, which won't grow on that waterless isle, were being imported each Sunday by a woman from Guadeloupe. She persuaded other passengers to carry her precious fruit as hand luggage; on St Barts, she sold the tomatoes at \$5 for half a kilo. At Kittitian Hill, however, they grow abundantly, if not always to schedule; a symbol, perhaps, of the place's potential.



A bedroom at the BelleMont Farm hotel

It's this proximity of farm and table that sets the tone for Kempadoo's endeavour. Breakfast is smoked chicken served on a sweet pumpkin tart topped by a fried egg with a yolk so yellow, it looks like it has come from a tube of paint. Sunday brunch — the restaurant busy with Kittitians as well as foreign hotel guests — is a feast of localness: pan-seared marlin in Jamaican chilli, lemongrass-poached lobster, guava-cured pork ham, and French toast prepared with rum, coconut milk and Nevisian honey.



Tafari Yahson, one of the farmers at Kittitian Hill

All fresh ingredients are sourced either from the farm, or island, including the duck, goat and rabbit. But it's the "pot fish" — grunt, parrotfish and "old wife", trapped by locals — I like best. This is poor man's food, which here comes laced with Caribbean fruit and spice. It couldn't be more different to the resorts who fly in Kobe beef from 4,000 miles away, even if the Normandy-born executive chef, Christophe Letard, has travelled almost the same distance only to throw off the shackles of his formal French training.

Ultimately it's Letard's kitchen that makes this resort so persuasive, despite Kittitian Hill still being incomplete, without a beach, and serviced by staff who want to please but are anything but polished. I leave converted — Kittitian Hill is everything Barbados isn't. It won't be for everyone, but for me, it's a delicious revelation.

Factbox

Sophy Roberts travelled as a guest of Kittitian Hill (kittitianhill.com) and ITC Luxury Travel (itcluxurytravel.co.uk). ITC offers a seven-night trip from £3,399 per person, with full-board accommodation at Belle Mont Farm (bellemontfarm.com) and return flights with British Airways to St Kitts from London, use of St. Kitts' new Yu Lounge private jet terminal, airport transfers, golf and spa treatments.