



The Isle of Nevis

PHOTO BY ROBERTA SOTONOFF

Quirks, characters, and class in the Caribbean

When you fly over the Caribbean, all the islands look alike—little dots in the ocean. But that’s misleading; each island has its own personality.

The British West Indies island of Nevis in the Leewards certainly does. Its quirks, characters, and class make it especially interesting. Its quirks start with its name: Although the island is in the tropics, its name is a misspelling of the Spanish word for “snow.” Columbus named it—the clouds atop Mount Nevis, also known as Nevis Peak, reminded him of snow—but we all know that he was lost.

The 36-square-mile island, crowned by the 3,232-foot peak, is lush, with bright flowers pouring off of its shrubbery. Encircled by crystal clear water, its beaches encircle the island.

But many islands are like that.

Okay, what about its sugar plantations that have been converted into inns? Those are pretty cool and romantic. Well, you say, other islands have those, too. You’re right.

Unlike most Caribbean islands, honey is a big deal on Nevis; the Nevis locals rave about it. But you have to take it on faith; the stores haven’t had any for about a year. And consider Nevis’s three

golf courses. Only the Robert Trent Jones II course at the Four Seasons Resort has a normal number of holes—eighteen. The others are two-hole and twelve-hole courses. Go figure.

Another thing: Taxi drivers have their nicknames emblazoned across the fronts of their cars. “Postman,” “Energizer,” and “Marlon Brando” are popular road fixtures. My regular driver, T.C., who tells me her real name is Tough Cookie, certainly fits into the character category. Turning her head and her iridescent red hair toward the back seat, she loves to chat.

“I have spent thirteen years of paradise here, dahling,” she says in her British accent. As she navigates the island’s one road and its bumpy byways, she talks of the island’s history, its friendly people, who all seem to know one another, and the low crime rate. “You can’t sell what you steal, because everyone knows who you are,” she says.

Another resident who falls into the character category is the knowledgeable but slightly eccentric Jim Johnson. He owns Top to Bottom, an eco-tour company that provides guided nature hikes. A former animal pathologist, Johnson speaks mostly in scientific terms, and you have to press him for the popular names of flowers and plants.

He fashions a hat from a large leaf and puts it on his head. "Good protection from the rain," he explains. About halfway through our nature walk, Johnson whips out some "snacks of the island"—coconut, guava chews, and tamarind. He hands me a small fruit so tart it practically glues my inner cheeks together. After the tartness subsides, we continue toward an old sugar mill that's buried in the thicket.

Sugar mills are all over the island. In the 1600s, Nevis produced what was said to be the best sugar in the Caribbean, earning it the name "Queen of the Caribbees."

Its first capital, Jamestown, is said to have been swallowed by a tidal wave that followed an earthquake in the late 1600s. The capital was moved to Charlestown on higher ground. Modern Charlestown is mostly just Main Street, a couple of stores, and a market by the waterfront. Alexander Hamilton was born by this waterfront, where the Museum of Nevis History now stands.

Many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sugar plantations have become some of the island's most romantic inns. Montpelier Plantation Inn is one of the most popular. Its original main house serves as a dining room, bar, and reception area. What's great about this inn is that with a reservation, one can dine inside its old sugar mill.

"The nice thing about the island is that all the hotels are slightly different," says Lincoln Hoffman, owner of Montpelier Plantation.

The Hermitage, with its 300-year-old Great House, offers carriage rides along wooded back roads and in the rainforest. If you like a good hike, follow the trail from Mount Nevis Beach Club to the eighteenth-century ruins of the Thomas Cottle Church. But first, stop at the hotel to enjoy lovely Caribbean vistas and views of St. Kitts.

I have plans to join one of the horseback tours from the Hermitage but have forgotten to change and am wearing sandals. No problem: owner Richard Lupinacci finds me jodhpurs and shoes for my ride through the burbs.

Small pink coralitas, colorful bougainvillea, and impatiens blossoms tumble among the plants and trees. Chickens, goats, monkeys, and pigs materialize before breadfruit, avocado, and mango trees around gingerbread houses. Everyone waves. The highlight of the ride



If it's worth a trip it's on



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Mount Nevis is the focal point of the island.

Take your pick of guided tours and hikes to explore Nevis Peak. There are options even for those who prefer an easy amble.

is a lookout at Saddle Hill Fort, where a spectacular view of Mount Nevis and some of the neighboring islands unfolds around me.

"All the inns of Nevis have ambience," says Lynnell Liburd, owner of Sunrise Tours. Liburd has taken such celebs as Britney Spears, Kelly Ripa, and Wayne Gretzky to climb Mount Nevis. "Nature hikes are a big business," he says.

I join his Golden Rock Hike, a pleasant amble up part of the mountain. During the walk, he talks about island life and points out plants that have medicinal value. He grimaces when we reach a castor oil tree. "Every morning we had to stand in a row while [his mother or grandmother] spread our teeth with castor oil. We hated it," says Liburd about the old-fashioned cure-all.

Of course, why go to an island if you are not going to enjoy the water and the beach? The diving and snorkeling are awesome. Black, spiny sea urchins are everywhere, and water visibility is so good, I even spot a flounder lying on a rock. Catamaran snorkeling trips as well as kayaking adventures leave from Oualie Beach Hotel. Talk to Winston Crooke at Oualie Beach if you want to go windsurfing. Crooke, who also rents mountain bikes, says he can teach anyone to windsurf in two hours.

All Nevis beaches have public access, so make a point to enjoy them. Pinney

Beach, one of the best on Nevis, is where you'll find Sunshine's, a celebrity hangout and home of the potent, rum-filled Killer Bee drink.

Nevis has its luxuries, too. Next to Pinney Beach is the Four Seasons Resort. Gingerbread cottages enveloped in a tropical garden comprise the hotel's elegant spa, a wonderful place to escape the world. The masseuse for my hot-stone massage was so good that he knew where my pains were without my even telling him.

And two or three times a week, June Meister opens her home to a select few for Miss June's Cuisine. She lavishly entertains about fifteen or twenty people, with cocktail hour in the living room and a grand feast that might include local dishes and Trinidadian curries served in the elegant dining room. Don't even think about going without a reservation; some people make them as soon as they get off the plane.

And if you are like me, when you board the plane to leave, you will be sad. This island is a very special place. 🍷

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If You Go...

Nevis Tourism Authority:

869/469-7550 or 866/55-NEVIS (556-3847)

www.nevisisland.com.

Several airlines, including USAir, American Eagle, and several inter-island airlines connect to Nevis. A ferry service runs between St. Kitts and Nevis; telephone 869/466-INFO (4636).



Top to Bottom owner Jim Johnson offers his own flavor to nature hikes.